

After the Last Race

A novel by **Dean R. Koontz**



After The Last Race

Dean Koontz

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Century Oaks Race Course is modeled after the usual thoroughbred racetrack and is not meant to represent any one, actual racetrack. The characters in this novel are fictional. Any resemblance to real persons living or dead is coincidental.

Wine maketh merry, but money answereth all things.

Ecclesiastes, X. 19

Ah, take the Cash, and let the Credit go,

Nor heed the rumble of a distant Drum!

Omar Khayyam, Rubiy t

Money, which represents the prose of life, and which is hardly spoken of in parlors without an apology, is, in its effects and laws, as beautiful as roses.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nominalist and Realist

Make money, money by fair means if you can, if not, by any means money.

Horace, Epistles, Bk. I

Money alone sets all the world in motion.

Publilius Syrus, Maxim 656

Part One

One

Garrison slowly turned in a full circle, studying the clearing that lay between the two birch trees. This was where the gateway man would wait for the signal. Here where the view was good. Here in the shadows. Here with no one but the birds. It was perfect.

At one o'clock in the afternoon, the thickly wooded ridge was still damp from the morning's thundershowers. The leaves on the lowest branches sparkled with fat droplets of water that had gradually dripped down from the higher reaches of the trees. Nearer the ground, mountain laurel and rhododendron drooped slightly with the weight of the rain, but they looked fresh and clean and as green as the vigorous strokes of a child's crayons. Occasional lances of spring sunshine thrust through holes in the green canopy, but for the most part the ridge was shadowy and cool.

Edgar Garrison had only a little trouble climbing the slope to the birch

clearing. The earth was moist, and the carpet of leaf mulch glistened like polished tortoiseshell. Several times he had slipped and grabbed at a tree or a limestone formation to keep his balance. Otherwise, the hike was no more taxing than a brisk Sunday walk. He had followed the channels that, through the years, had been cut by rain water sluicing down from the top. He had reached the crest of the ridge less than ten minutes after starting up from the clearing in the valley. At the edge of the forest he had found this deep pool of shadows between two slender white birches that grew under the skirt of a pine big enough to be the White House Christmas tree. Standing where he could not be seen, he studied the Century Oaks Race Course, which was bright and clean against the softly rolling Pennsylvania hills. The backstretch was at this end of the track's twelve hundred acres, not more than three hundred feet down the slope, encircled by a high cyclone fence. Inside the fence fifty-eight long barns, all rusty red with brilliant white roofs, stood in neatly ordered rows and provided stabling for nearly eighteen hundred horses. Half a dozen grooms and exercise girls were standing in a tight group in front of the track-owned motel where they rented rooms; they were laughing and talking animatedly. Garrison could not hear anything they said, but he caught the shrillest strains of the laughter. A very beautiful three-year-old chestnut filly posed regally in front of her stall while a young girl carefully brushed down her flanks. Two horses that had been in the first race of the afternoon were circling lazily in the wide aisle between two barns, following meekly behind the hot walkers whose job it was to relax, calm, and cool them before they were returned to their stalls. The scene was as idyllic as a good honeymoon, gentle and soft and quiet.

The memories it evoked were too poignant for Garrison. He breathed deeply and, with an effort, looked away from the familiar backstretch. Beyond the stables, following the far side of the cyclone fence, fifty enormous oak trees stood like sentinels in a straight line from east to west. The mile-long track was on the other side of the oaks, ringed with freshly painted white railing. Two yellow tractors with striped sun awnings were dragging heavy steel graders around the loam, smoothing away all traces of the first race as the post time for the second race drew near. He could see them as they drove past the empty spaces between the trunks of the oaks.

Looking higher, over the tops of the mammoth trees, he could see most of the clubhouse. The lower tiers of the grandstand were concealed by the oaks. But he had a good view of the upper levels as well as a clean line to all of the glass-walled clubhouse restaurant and the entire fifth floor, which contained the track offices, the judges' eyrie, the stewards' room, the news room, and the fancy VIP

restaurant.

He raised the Zeiss binoculars that hung from his neck, and he focused on the videotape cameras that were fixed at the edge of the clubhouse roof. When his field of vision was sharp, he lowered the binoculars until he was looking into the news room on the fifth floor, at least half and perhaps as much as two-thirds of a mile away. Half a dozen reporters and as many hangers-on were standing at the windows watching the odds change on the electronic totalizator board which faced them from the infield. The binoculars were so good that he could even identify two of the newsmen.

Very nice, he said softly.

Garrison swung the binoculars from right to left, past the judges' quarters, past the room where the stewards waited to answer any questions of form, past eleven other windows until he came to the tiny office he wanted. The room was dark. The upper half of its single window reflected the sunlight and the few scattered, fast-moving gray clouds that still marred the spring sky.

He lowered the binoculars and glanced at his wrist-watch. It was twenty minutes past one. He had ten more minutes to waste.

Sitting on a small limestone outcropping a few steps back from the twin birches, he listened to the birds warbling as they preened from their feathers the drops of rain that had passed to them from the leaves overhead.

He looked at home there in the middle of the forest. He was six-two, two hundred pounds, and as lean and hard at thirty-seven as he had been at twenty-one. His face was hard too, well tanned and weathered by enough leathery creases to make him look rugged but not old. With his high forehead, deepset brown eyes, and shock of untrainable brown hair, he was Hollywood's idea of the lonesome cowboy. He had a thick neck, wide shoulders, arms that were a bit too long, and those large flat-fingered hands that are a prerequisite for professional basketball stars. He was wearing tennis shoes, jeans, a long-sleeved blue workshirt, and the binoculars. If this had been a different age, if he'd been dressed in hand-made buckskin, he would have been a fine figure of a mountain man.

He looked at his watch again, got up, went back between the birch trees, and raised the Zeiss glasses.

In spite of the sunny reflections, he could see her there at the window on the fifth floor. She was wearing a beige pantsuit with a pimento scarf at her throat, and she was holding up a square of red-and-white-striped cloth. She looked slightly comic, as if she thought she were directing airplanes that wanted to land on the clubhouse roof. The Zeiss glasses were so good that she could forget about the striped kerchief when it came time for the real operation on Saturday

afternoon.

Garrison took the strap from around his neck and slipped the binoculars into the leather case that was hooked to his belt. He snapped the case shut and studied the clearing once more and tried to imagine that each leaf was a bright green slip of United States currency. Two million dollars. Maybe more. It would buy a new life, new opportunities, new dignity. . . .

His attention was caught suddenly by shouting and laughter coming from the backstretch. A small, scraggly gray goat with a woman's purse in his mouth was running past the sides of the stables, just beyond the cyclone fence. A pretty blond girl was chasing him, waving her arms, shouting, grabbing at his stubby tail and missing it every time. Another girl and one of the grooms decided to help out, and then a middle-aged trainer with a belly that defied his belt joined in the chase. The goat led them up and down and up and down across the same stretch of ground, but finally they cornered him. He stared at them as they crouched and moved in on him, and at last he dropped the purse and sauntered away as if nothing had happened.

Edgar Garrison had seen it all before. The backstretch was full of animals: goats, chickens, cats, dogs, ducks, and anything else of manageable size that was necessary to round out a menagerie. A thoroughbred horse was a high-strung, sensitive creature, and it was a lot happier when it had a pet of its own, an animal that would stay by it most of the time and keep it company. For many horses, billies and nannies were the best pets., the most soothing companions available. To the people on the backstretch, the goats were rarely soothing and were sometimes downright aggravating. In the years he had worked as a trainer on the backstretches of a dozen tracks, Garrison had chased more than one thieving goat; nonetheless, he laughed softly as he watched the billy saunter away from the purse, laughed as if this were the first time that he had enjoyed the joke.

Those two decades spent on the backstretches all along the East Coast now suddenly returned to him like an inner thunder of hooves. Memory galloped after memory along the years: the first few difficult years as a hot walker and then as a groom, his assignment as assistant trainer, the first horse he trained according to his own regimen, his first win. . . . Racing had left him with many good memories. But it had also killed Helen.

When the onrushing recollections brought him to that ugly moment of the past, his mind fell down like a horse with a broken leg. He stood there in the woods as if pole-axed, his feet planted wide apart and his head lowered and his eyes vacant and his mouth gaping stupidly. After a long and awful moment he blinked and shook his head, made himself stop grieving for the dead woman, and turned away from

Century Oaks Race Course. He had cried himself dry years ago. He could not see any percentage in grief or melancholy at this point in his life. He did see a percentage in revenge; and it was for revenge that he must now conserve his time, strength, energy, and emotions.

He took several deep breaths, then checked his wrist-watch and noted the exact time. When the red second hand swept up to the top of the dial, Garrison started to run.

With his chin tucked down and his right arm up to keep the undergrowth from lashing into his eyes, he ran across the broad summit of the ridge. A trailing blackberry vine snared his jeans. He ripped free of the brambles and kept going.

When the ground began to drop off, he found a rain gully and started down the slope much faster than he had climbed it. Porous, water-smoothed limestone bottomed the rain run, and it was as slippery as a well-waxed floor. He fell, scrambled to his feet, and ran again. The gully forked when confronted with a tooth of rock that was more solid than the erodent limestone. He did not hesitate; he turned right, grabbed at the rock for balance, and kept moving.

The sound of his breathing came to him like a distant siren or whistle. That and the timpani beat of his own heart was all that he could hear. Halfway down the slope, mountain laurel grew on both sides of the channel and laced branches across it. Garrison bent down and tried to pass under the laurel, but it grew much too close to the ground to let him by that easily. He put his head down like a bull sighting the cape, and he charged straight through with one arm up to protect his eyes. Branches tore at his body. Brittle twigs scraped his exposed cheeks and chin, poked bluntly at his neck. His raised arm and especially that unprotected hand were gouged and abraded.

He kept moving as if he didn't feel any of the beating he was taking, and at last he came off the slope. On the valley floor he ran even faster than he had done coming down. He weaved in and out of the trees. His shoulders scraped the trunks. He twisted, jerked, and stooped to avoid low-hanging branches, but he kept moving. He leaped agilely over clumps of brush and over rotting logs.

He came out of the woods into a circular clearing that was four hundred feet in diameter with trees on all sides of it, and he did not stop running until he was in the middle of that sheltered field. Then he sagged and dropped to his knees in the tall grass and looked at his watch. He had made it down from the twin birches in three minutes and twenty-eight seconds.

Not bad. But was it good enough?

Stretching out on his back, he closed his eyes and thought about it while his breathing slowed and his heartbeat stopped pounding like a sheriff's fist on a door. Would the getaway man, this Dominick

Savestio, be able to make it down in as little as three minutes and twenty-eight seconds? What if Savestio were fat, slow, out of shape? And even if he were not out of shape, even if he could cover that distance in less than four minutes, would he then be able to fly the helicopter? Or would he need several minutes to regain his breath and to steady his hands? Already, little more than a minute after he had collapsed, Garrison felt almost normal, but maybe this Dominick Savestio would need time to recuperate after he reached the clearing or maybe he would have a heart attack when he was halfway down the slope.

Yeah, Garrison thought sarcastically, and maybe he'll come off that ridge so fast he won't be able to stop, and he'll run into that damned helicopter and knock himself cold. And while the rest of us are pinned down by the cops and waiting for our getaway man, he'll be flat on his back in the clearing. You better worry about that one too, Garrison. If he were going to fidget and fret like an old woman, he didn't belong in this operation. The plan could not tolerate indecision anywhere along the line. Naturally, reasonable caution was called for, but not neurotic caution. He hadn't even met this guy, this Savestio. And until he did he was wasting time worrying about the man.

He got up and walked to the east end of the clearing where he had parked his two-year-old Mazda. He got in, closed the door, hooked up the safety harness, and looked at his watch. When the slender second hand touched the twelve, Garrison started the car. He raced the quiet rotary engine, put it in gear, and tramped the accelerator all the way to the floor. He tore up twenty feet of grass on his way out of the clearing.

The trail that led into the eastern flank of the woods and toward the gently rising mountains was nothing more than a pair of shallow dirt ruts each as wide as a tire. Grass grew between the ruts, and weeds flourished on both sides of the crude lane. Fifty years ago it had been a timber road for the farmer who had come deep into the forest to get the trees which he cut for lumber and fuel. Later it was a hunting trail when sportsmen used the clearing as a rendezvous point during deer season. For five years now, ever since the race track had come into possession of the land, the trail had not been used at all except by Garrison.

For the first half mile a steep bank rose on the right, and the land fell away into the forest on the left. Some of the weeds on the bank overhung the road. They slapped the windshield and raked noisily along the right fenders; and, in passing over the roof, they scraped like long fingernails gouging insistently at the inside of a coffin lid. Garrison drove hard, pushing the Mazda to its limits. He wheeled to the left as the lane took a sudden turn. He avoided by inches a stand

of baby pines on the verge, slammed brutally across several wet-weather ruts, swung right as the bank dropped away and the road took another abrupt change in direction.

The wind screamed at the open window beside him.

The lane narrowed as elms, birches, and scraggly pines crowded closer like auto-racing buffs eagerly anticipating disaster. The few inches of open ground on the shoulders disappeared, and the road was only as wide as it had to be.

A variety of fat insects splattered like soft bullets against the windshield.

The trail slid downward for half a mile. As he picked up speed, he saw that the land bottomed out at the base of the hill, and the lane vanished into a tunnel of pine boughs. Confident that he remembered the route fairly well from his trip in to the clearing, he brought the Mazda up to sixty-five miles an hour.

The tires thundered on the runneled earth.

Garrison drove like a professional: cautious, watchful, with one foot on the accelerator and the other foot poised over the brake pedal.

When he barreled into the straightaway at the bottom of the hill, he needed every bit of skill at his command.

A natural drainage ditch at the side of the road had overflowed during the morning's rainstorm, and the two ribbons of dirt in which the car moved were suddenly gooey with mud. The track was as slick as a sled run.

The Mazda shimmied for a moment, was jolted out of the ruts, and glided sideways toward a lightning-blasted elm that was as big as a house. The wheel spun in Garrison's hands. The car was completely out of control.

When he touched the brakes, Garrison felt the car shudder. He released the pedal, waited an instant, tapped it again. The car was goaded into a tighter turn, and the back end whipped past the elm with only a bark's width to spare.

The steering wheel still worked loosely back and forth.

He released the brakes and went with the car for a moment, braked again, then rode with it once more, stepped down, let up. . . . The Mazda kept turning smoothly like a merry-go-round. It was a hundred and eighty degrees into the turn now, pointing back the way it had come, still sliding. . . .

Suddenly the wheel ceased spinning uselessly under his hands, and he felt some control return to him. The speed had dropped to just twenty miles an hour. He nursed the Mazda all the way around until it was facing the pines, and he tramped on the accelerator and got moving once more. When the pines closed overhead and the shadows deepened, the lane was fairly dry and he no longer had to worry.

Perspiration beaded on his forehead, trickled down his face and soaked his shirt. He was trembling.

Half a minute later he slowed the car and slammed through a flimsy barrier of high grass, last year's dead milkweed plants, wild rhubarb, and other miscellaneous brush. Beyond, he came to a full stop in a roadside picnic area, ten yards from a two-lane macadam highway. He looked at his watch and saw that he had made two miles in three minutes. About forty miles an hour over rough terrain. It was better than he had expected, certainly good enough.

He leaned back against the headrest and waited for the shaking to stop.

Then he put the car in gear and drove onto the highway. He didn't follow the series of back roads which he had mapped out to Harrisburg. Instead, he turned right and followed the two-lane to another highway that passed in front of the main gates of Century Oaks Race Course.

A few minutes later he drove slowly past the enormous parking lots and past the huge, rectangular, boxlike main building. He had to smile. This side of the clubhouse building was a brilliant white except for two yard-wide bands of color, one running from end to end and the other from foundation to roof. The effect was of scarlet ribbons binding a gigantic gift package. And in a way that's what it was. A gift package. A gift of money. A multimillion-dollar gift. On Saturday afternoon, at the height of Sweepstakes Week, he would help to unwrap that package.

Two

Jack Killigan, the general manager of Century Oaks, sat at his corner table on the top tier of the Horsemen's Club and used his binoculars to watch the horses line up in the starting gate on the far side of the track. For the last twenty minutes, Killigan had been moving from table to table, shaking hands, greeting the high rollers, complimenting their wives, and graciously accepting praise for the condition of the track on this opening day of the first fifty-day meet of the year. But now as the fifth race was about to begin, Jack Killigan knew his place: out of everyone's way.

The Horsemen's Club was a glass-walled membership-only restaurant on the fifth level of the main building, situated over one corner of the fourth-floor clubhouse restaurant. The room held only sixty-one tables on two tiers, with seating for four at each table. Every chair in the Club commanded an excellent view of the distant mountains, the magnificent oak trees that partly concealed the backstretch, and the big track that was now the focus of everyone's attention.

No luxury had been spared in this VIP restaurant. In fact, Killigan thought as he lowered his binoculars and looked around the room,

perhaps the luxury had been overdone. The tables were all large and comfortable, and they were all laid with white linen as perfect as the day it had come from the store. If a tablecloth were to sustain a cigarette burn that required patching or a stain that could not be entirely eradicated, it would be consigned to the clubhouse restaurant on the floor below, and a new cloth would be unfolded for the Horsemen's Club. The china and silverware were of fine quality, complemented by a stainless steel bud vase and two fresh roses one white and one red on each table. Every chair was a captain's chair with padded arms and studded leatherette upholstery. The tight-heap carpet was not as luxurious as something you might find in a private home, but it was the most expensive all-weather carpet available, a deep red color that gave the room considerable warmth. On the right-hand wall the carpet went all the way to the ceiling; thus, it acted not only to please the eye but to further deaden any sound that might come from the newsroom or the other offices on the fifth floor. The inside of the main door to the Club was also covered in red carpet and molded flush to the rest of the wall. The Horsemen's Club was perfectly soundproofed. The other walls were paneled in mahogany, and the suspended ceiling was done in yard-square pieces of dark cork hung on a chrome frame.

When he had brought Rita up here to show her the Club on Friday evening, two days before the opening of the meet, she had been quite enthusiastic.

You've done wonders, Jack!

You really like it?

It positively drips money.

So do the people who've shelled out three thousand bucks to reserve a table for two hundred racing days when they won't even make it to the track half that often.

Like my father? And me?

Your father doesn't drip money. He gushes it.

She laughed. You know what?

What?

It's a good room for fucking.

Really now, Rita.

No, I mean it. All these warm colors, soft textures . . . And those fifty-foot-high glass walls appeal to the exhibitionist in me.

I think we better go.

Don't be a spoilsport, Jack.

And don't you work so hard at shocking me.

I'm not trying to shock you. I just think it would be fun. Nobody's around. We could turn off the lights. Then we could see out onto the track, but no one could see us. . . .

It's getting late.

Honestly, Jack! Don't you sometimes feel like letting loose, doing something crazy, breaking the rules?

No. It's hard enough to get by without breaking the rules.

So you're happy with just getting by.

Quite happy, Rita. Quite happy.

And working within the rules, cajoling and persuading and arguing and threatening the board of directors, he had revitalized Century Oaks Race Course. Starting with a tacky business, he had modernized and streamlined and redecorated with taste until he had come up with a model track. The Horsemen's Club was especially good proof that there was no longer anything tacky about Century Oaks.

Even the mutuel windows of the Club were something special. They were at the back of the second tier, behind a well-polished brass railing: twelve of them: eight ticket sellers and four cashiers. These were nothing like the windows on the other levels of the building. They were crafted of mahogany panels and chrome trimming, very clean and warm and pleasant to the eye, a long way from the clean but austere white panels, green plastic trim, and clear Plexiglas of the clubhouse windows, and light-years beyond the spare, neat but essentially hole-in-the-wall windows framed by concrete blocks on the grandstand levels.

The high rollers in the Horsemen's Club did not even have to get up from their tables to place their bets. Twelve Pony Express Girls waited at strategic points throughout the two tiers, ready to take the guest's money, run it to the mutuel windows, and return with his tickets. The Pony Express Girls wore red mid-calf boots and tight, short shorts to match the boots, and white sweaters with red horses stitched over the left breast. They also wore big red-and-white jockey caps tilted at a rakish angle. These messengers were all local girls chosen for grace and poise but most especially for their long legs, round asses, pinched waists, pert breasts, and pretty faces. Not one of them was hard to watch. As they ran back and forth placing the guests' bets, they helped to make the time between each race pass quickly.

Naturally, Rita had something to say about them. Even before she opened her lovely mouth, he had known what she would say, word for word.

How much money do you think they'll make on the side? And I don't mean just in tips.

On the side?

Excuse me, she said. On their backs.

You have a filthy mind.

Realistic mind. And I love it.

These are all local girls, Rita. They aren't professional models. They

haven't been hired from an 'escort' company. They come from good families. They aren't prostitutes.

But how much do you think they'll make?

You're incorrigible.

Look, do all these men come with their wives?

Not always.

Or their dates?

No.

With or without their wives, she said, they're going to look. Without their wives, they're going to want to touch. Are you trying to tell me there aren't a few of these girls who'll take money and like it?

Okay. Maybe a few of them. One or two.

You admit it, then!

Admit what? That I can't control human nature?

That you're indirectly pimping for your high rollers.

That's an ugly thing to say.

I don't think it's ugly, Jack. I think it's kind of nice. Touching. You want to serve them every way possible.

You're incorrigible.

You said that already.

So I'll say it again.

Admit it, Jack. From the moment you came up with the idea of Pony Express Girls, you saw the possibilities. All the possibilities. Didn't you?

Maybe I did. The success of the New Century Oaks depends to a great extent on people who bet three, four, five, even ten thousand dollars on a single program. I want them to be happy. If it means turning my head to a little subtle solicitation, so what? I don't have to justify this to anyone. This is my last chance. If I don't make a go here, I'm out of thoroughbred racing for good.

Poor darling. I didn't mean you should justify it. You don't need to justify it. I think it's charming.

You would.

She laughed.

Killigan was jolted from his reverie by the booming voice of the track announcer calling the early positions of the horses in the fifth race. He picked up his binoculars and focused on the track.

Excuse me, Mr. Killigan.

He lowered his glasses and looked up.

A waiter in an immaculate white jacket, white shirt, black tie, and black slacks was at his right elbow. The man held a telephone. You're being paged, sir. Are you available?

Yes, Killigan said.

The waiter went to the other side of the table, put down the phone,

and plugged it into a jack set flush in the floor. By order of the State Horse Racing Commission, there were no public phones on the track. A plug-in model was kept for the manager's table so that no phone would be in plain sight, at other times, to tempt a guest. Even the track's business phones were shut off an hour before the first race, except for one phone in the manager's office and two guarded phones, one in the backstretch and one in the operator's niche in the clubhouse to be used only for emergencies. The tight security was necessary to keep vital racing information from being leaked to bookies, among other people. Finished, the waiter smiled and turned to go.

Wait, Killigan said. If you had food or drinks to serve, and if you were serving a guest instead of me, I hope you'd wait for the race to be over. You must never interrupt anyone in the middle of a race.

The waiter blushed. He was young, dark-eyed, hollow-cheeked. I'm sorry, sir. I've never waited tables at a track before.

Killigan smiled. Just remember. He picked up the receiver. Killigan here.

Henry Cooper, sir. I'm a TRPB agent here, and I've got a problem. Can you come to your office? I'm waiting there for you.

What sort of problem? Killigan asked.

Ticket forgery.

Wait there. I'll be along in a minute.

Yes, sir.

Killigan hung up, finished the bourbon in his glass, got to his feet, and left his binoculars on the table. Crossing the top tier of the Club, he had to weave between the Pony Express Girls who were running to the mutuel windows with winning tickets on the fifth race. He stepped on the concealed mat in front of the carpet-covered door, waited for the door to slide open, then went through it into the restaurant's small foyer. When he passed the half-wall on the other side of the foyer, he was in the main hall on the fifth floor, and he strode quickly down toward his office.

Although he was a man of only average height and build, Jack Killigan impressed almost everyone as a strong, tough customer. He was five-ten, slightly over a hundred and fifty pounds. He was as lean as a greyhound, and he moved with brisk, efficient grace. His face was square, though slightly elongated in the lower half, with a firm and dimpled chin. Lips nearly as thin as pencil lines added a cruel touch to his face. He had a straight nose too broad to be called aristocratic, and eyes as fiercely blue as gas flames. His hair was worn full on the sides, and he had as much of it now as when he had been young. When he was in his middle thirties, his hair had turned a distinguished iron-gray color. Nevertheless, he looked at least a decade younger than his fifty years. Walking down that wide corridor, he had the aura and

energy of a young man just starting out in life.

Henry Cooper, the Thoroughbred Racing Protective Bureau agent who had paged Killigan, was sitting at the ultra-modern walnut and steel secretary's desk in the waiting room. He rose when Killigan came in from the corridor.

You Cooper?

Yes.

It's too public here. Let's talk in my office.

Killigan led the other man into his sanctum sanctorum and pointed to a large, crushed-velvet easy chair that had a high back and thick round arms. As Cooper sat down, Killigan went behind his enormous desk and sat in a black leather posturematic office chair.

The TRPB man was examining the desk curiously. Isn't this a piano case?

Killigan smiled and fingered the elaborate carving on one of the enormous legs. Steinway, I had them rip out the guts and lower the lid. They cut the lid until it fit the frame.

Very nice, Cooper said.

It gives me a couple of square yards of work surface and it reminds me that I used to play a lot of piano when I was a kid. Cozy feeling to it. I don't like the place to seemofficey. That's why you're sitting in an easy chair. That's why I have bookcases here and velvet drapes and a good Persian carpet. . . . I've had to live in two dozen different houses over the years, but I cart this stuff around with me, and I always have the same office no matter where I am. He patted the rich, solid surface of the desk. What about this ticket forgery?

Cooper took a ten-dollar mutuel ticket from his shirt pocket. He was young, in his late twenties, six foot, on the husky side, with crisp brown hair and dark eyes and a pale complexion. He moved slowly but fluidly, the kind of man who never appeared to be in a rush even when he was moving twice as fast as you could ever hope to. He leaned out of his chair and placed the ticket up on the desk in front of Killigan. Fourth race. Sixth horse to win. It's a nice piece of work. After he had stared at it for nearly a minute, Killigan said, You aren't telling me the entire ticket's a forgery?

No.

But I can't see where it's been altered.

It's definitely one of our own ten-dollar win tickets, Cooper said. But the number of the horse has been changed.

Killigan examined it more closely than he had done. You couldn't prove that by me.

Cooper took another ticket from his shirt pocket. This is the real thing. Compare them.

Putting the tickets side by side, Killigan studied them. Ah, he said

softly. The loop on the six is too big. Not much, but a little. Somebody bought a ten-dollar win ticket, waited to see which horse would win, then went into the men's room and sat down in a stall and carefully erased the real number, drew in the six. But for Christ's sake, man, it's nearly perfect! You mean to tell me one of our mutuel clerks spotted it for what it was?

Cooper smiled thinly. His dark eyes glittered like the points of knives. That's too easy.

I thought it was. Tell me.

Sitting on the edge of the easy chair, his elbows on the arms of the chair and his hands clasped in front of him, Cooper hardly moved at all while he explained it. He was like a lizard on a rock. Forgery artists usually work on the grandstand levels. Better cover there. But this one tried to move the ticket in the clubhouse though maybe he's operating both ways. Anyhow, about twenty minutes after the judges posted the final places in the fourth, this old woman comes up to Jim Otley, one of the cashiers on the west end of the top clubhouse level. She has the doctored mutuel ticket I just showed you. You know the way one of these artists works?

Killigan nodded. After he's altered the ticket, he finds a sweet old lady or some other likely candidate. He tells her he's an employee of the track and isn't allowed to bet, but he does bet and now he's got a winner. He can't cash it in himself without losing his job. Will she cash it for him?

You've got it, Cooper said, barely nodding his head. But this time the artist picked the wrong old lady. She said yes she'd be glad to help. She took the ticket, went to the ten-dollar cashier, and demanded to see the manager.

Killigan sat up straight in his chair. What?

Otley asked her what was wrong. Turns out she's a real bitch. She starts ranting about track employees placing bets on the basis of secret inside information' that gives them an advantage over poor ordinary folks like herself. She's red in the face. So mad she's ready to choke. Instead of calling you, Otley switches on the red Christmas bulb over his window. And since I'm on duty in the clubhouse today, I'm there before the old lady can stop spluttering. I get the drift of it pretty quick, and I ask her to show me this man who gave her the ticket. And he was gone.

As if he'd never been.

Description?

Cooper grimaced. Middle-aged. Neither tall nor short. Neither thin nor fat. Dark hair, probably brown, maybe black, or maybe even dark blond. Dark brown eyes, or at least dark eyes, and maybe even dark blue eyes. Ordinary voice. Ordinary suit and shirt. She didn't happen

to notice his shoes or if he was wearing any jewelry.

Picking up the ticket, Jack Killigan said, If he did it in the fourth race, he faked one in each of the first three races. And maybe he's still working.

And maybe it's not just one ticket each race, Cooper said. Could be two. Or five. Or even ten.

You're making me ill, Killigan said. What would the payoff have been on this thing? He waved the forged ticket at the agent.

The number six horse in the fourth race was Cup o' Chocolate. It went out the gate at ten to one. So the payoff was at least a hundred bucks. And he could have clipped us for ten tickets in that one race? Killigan stood up and went to the bar that was in the center of one of the bookcases and slid open the smoked-glass door. Drink?

No thanks, Cooper said.

Killigan dropped two ice cubes in a glass and splashed some Wild Turkey bourbon over them. Fletcher knows about this?

Oscar Fletcher was the chief of the TRPB unit at Century Oaks. He was fifty-seven, fat, ugly, sloppy as clever as a good magician and as efficient as a computer.

He knows. He's put me in charge of the field work on the case.

Killigan paced as he sipped his bourbon. Today of all days we don't need this bastard ripping us off. We're already being ripped off.

How do you figure? Cooper asked.

We're donating ten percent of today's gross to local charities. Good public relations. But with this guy chewing at us we could end up in the hole for the first day of the season. I guess I could stand that if I thought he was here for the day and then we'd never feel his pinch again. But that isn't likely, is it?

No, Cooper said. He continued to perch motionless on the edge of his chair. Only his head moved as he followed Killigan from one end of the room to the other. There's been so much great publicity for Sweepstakes Week. Everybody knows we're going to draw big crowds. The bigger the crowds, the better the cover for an artist like this. He'll stay all week. He'll probably do most of his work on Saturday.

Unless we stop him.

We can.

What steps are you taking?

It isn't an easy thing, Cooper said. We've alerted all our men. We've called a meeting of the unformed Melkins-Peterson guards for immediately after the track's cleared today, and we're going to tell them exactly what to watch for. The washroom attendants are going to pay special attention to anyone who enters a stall with a briefcase or an extremely large handbag; a forgery kit takes up a good bit of room. Otherwise . . . well, we just have to wait for this guy to make a

mistake.

Oh, wonderful.

Cooper stood up. He'll make one. They always do.

When he had tossed off the last of the bourbon, Killigan put his glass on the desk and held out his right hand.

Henry Cooper shook it.

I didn't mean to sound like a critic, Killigan said. You seem like a damned good, quick-thinking man. I feel a lot better knowing you're working on this.

A gentle trace of red emerged on Cooper's pale cheeks. Thank you, sir. Let me know if any more tickets turn up or if you get a lead on this sonofabitch.

Cooper picked up the mutuel tickets that were on the desk and put them back in his shirt pocket. I'll do that, Mr. Killigan. And don't worry about it. He'll make a mistake. They always do.

When he was alone Killigan took the glass off the desk and returned to the bar. He threw out the old ice cubes, dropped in two new ones, gave himself two ounces of bourbon.

He was drinking too much today. He had been drinking too much for the last several days, ever since Rita Janifer had come home from California. He was pretty good at holding his liquor, though. Damned good, in fact. No one ever knew when he was drunk. Even with half a fifth under his belt he could walk a straight line and talk without slurring his words. He didn't get glassy-eyed or red in the face. He was one of those drunks who became more and more cautious with every drink, super careful, aware that even the slightest misstep would lead to a rubber-legged, mush-mouthed disaster; and as a result he appeared to be more sober when he was drunk than when he was not. But the bourbon cost you Hialeah, Jack.

During the last few days he often had reminded himself of that painful truth. Every time he realized he was drinking too much and reaching too far for rationalizations, he thought of how the damned bourbon had cost him his manager's roost at Hialeah. And the job after that at Belmont. And then Santa Anita. And Hollywood Park. And now this was his last chance, and he couldn't let the bourbon do it to him a fifth time. They had handed him a poorly managed, losing operation in Century Oaks, had given him a blank check, and were now waiting to see what he would do with it. If he made it work, he could climb up again. Maybe all the way back to Hialeah one day. If he botched it, he'd never work in thoroughbred racing again.

He swirled the whiskey in the glass. Ice clinked musically.

He had never been fired because he drank. No one in the business knew that he was an on-again-off-again drunk. All they knew was that at some point in his term as manager, a track began to slip. He could

be great for a while, and then . . . attendance dropped. He made the wrong corporate decisions. His publicity work went sour. The quality of the horses went down as the value of the purses declined. All over the plant itself there was an air of shabbiness and neglect. And he was dismissed to make way for new blood.

Whether they knew it or not, it was the bourbon.

Like hell it was, he said to the whiskey in his hands, as if he were arguing with the drink and not with himself. It isn't the bourbon. It's Rita. It has always been Rita, from Hialeah on. She is

The in-house telephone burred softly on his desk.

He was startled, and he thought: Jesus, Killigan, you're in bad shape when you start talking to yourself.

The phone burred again.

He swallowed the rest of his bourbon and picked up the receiver.

Killigan here.

The voice on the other end was gruff and low. Jack, this is Mickey.

Mickey Ginchey was the chief of maintenance at Century Oaks. I got a real problem here, Jack.

Don't we all? He slumped into his office chair. What's yours, Mickey?

You know we got this contract with Agroco.

Killigan said: They pick up the stall muck.

Agroco was a large farming, canning and land management company that was diversified into a dozen businesses. One of its sidelines was the sale and transport of chemical and organic fertilizers. Agroco owned a dozen large tank trucks that were able to load and carry the manure-matted straw from the stables. Since most farmers and even most mushroom growersmushrooms being a big industry in this part of Pennsylvaniapreferred to use chemical fertilizers, Agroco didn't have much of a market for the track's waste; however, when the track paid Agroco all transportation costs to get rid of the stuff, Agroco could sell it easily enough at a rock-bottom price and make a small profit. They said it was small. Last year, the track had paid Agroco \$120,000 just to haul the muck away.

Yeah, Mickey said. Well, they didn't pick it up Friday. And when they didn't come today, I called that manager of theirs, Simpson. Wanted to tell him to be sure to send more trucks on Monday. Got him at home. He didn't like being bothered. But he did break down and let me know his people are on strike.

Killigan winced. Oh, God.

If we don't work out something fast, I'm going to be up to my ears in horseshit, Mickey said.

The backstretch of Century Oaks held almost eighteen hundred horses. Each of those beautiful, expensive animals worked at producing manure as if that were its only occupation. By the end of each day,

when the grooms had mucked out all the stalls and delivered the straw and manure to pickup points in front of each stable, and once Mickey's men had moved these separate molehills to the common mountain of the compost dump, there was a heap of foul matter that weighed anywhere between forty and forty-five tons. Agroco was supposed to make pickups on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. If they hadn't come on Friday and weren't coming today, the compost heap would contain as much as 175 tons of muckings by tomorrow morning.

Look, Killigan said, my secretary isn't here, so I'll have to work on this myself. It's going to take a while. And I've got to go back to the Horsemen's Club to shake hands with anyone I might have missed the first time through. But I promise you someone will be here in the morning to make a collection.

Someone better be, Mickey said. 'Cause by tomorrow night the smell's sure going to upset the paying customers.

Killigan hung up and went for a quick shot of bourbon, just one more little nip to put him right.

Christ, what a variety there was in a track manager's life! From forgery artists to a crisis in horseshit. And the season was just beginning!

Suddenly he felt alive and energetic again. He forgot about Hialeah, Belmont, Santa Anita, Hollywood Park, and Rita Janifer. All of his know-how and attention was directed toward Century Oaks. He had always been vitalized by a challenge, and he had a hunch that the rest of this week right on through Sweepstakes Day was going to be the biggest challenge he had ever faced.

Three

Annie Sherred's farm, where Garrison was living, lay just west of Dillsburg, a small town south of Harrisburg, a forty-five-minute drive from Century Oaks. The Sherred farm was one hundred acres of gently rolling fields which had not been tilled in nearly a decade and had been taken over by rich green grass, plus seventy acres of dense woodlands. The barn was large and red, trimmed in white, roofed with black slate; it now served as a garage. All of the sheds and other buildings were painted white, as was the nine-room house at the front of the property.

After he had parked the Mazda in the barn, Edgar Garrison came in through the kitchen, stopped for a moment at the refrigerator, then went out to the front porch. For nearly an hour now he had been sitting in a bentwood rocking chair, bathed in the fresh May air that streamed through the open sides of the porch. A half-finished can of beer stood on a small wicker table beside him, and an unread copy of Time lay in his lap. He rocked quietly back and forth, watching the

county road and the long driveway that came up from it and went past the side of the house to the barn.

He kept thinking about the robbery. The plan was like an incomplete piece of ethereal sculpture which he, the sculptor, rotated end-for-end and side-for-side in his mind; he searched for the flaws in design, studied the problems of shape and form that were not yet solved. And while he thought about it, one vivid memory kept creeping back to him, a death's head memory that crawled close without his sensing it, then suddenly jumped at him, grinning. I was nineteen. That's a long time ago. I just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. That ugly little scene would have transpired whether or not I was there to see it. In no way was it a premonition or a harbinger of events in my own life. No way. Ridiculous. Might as well believe in ghosts and goblins. . . . He had been a groom working for a trainer, Sudsy McKay, at Aqueduct. Sudsy paid him Friday morning, a slim collection of bills paper-clipped to a long envelope that bore his name. When he found time that afternoon, he hopped into his broken-down Henry Jay and drove to the nearby bank where he did business. It was his habit, in those days, to deposit five dollars a week in a savings account no matter how little he made. He was standing at one of the teller's windows when four men came through the front doors of the bank, all of them wearing pigskin gloves and dark suits and masks, two of them carrying submachine guns.

In three minutes they had cleaned out the tellers' drawers as well as the cash cart just inside the vault. One of them even plucked Garrison's pay envelope from his hand. And then they were backing away across the large lobby, moving carefully, moving quickly, one of them already at the door and waiting for the others, the tallest one murmuring soothingly to the bank guard and the other employees, professionals, real professionals, working to plan, at the doors now, moving through the doors now, two of them turning and two still facing people in the bank, the tall man continuing to murmur, the tall man asking that there please be no dead heroes please, and then through the doors, and all of them turning, and then the gunfire . . . Jesus, the gunfire! It came like a summer thunder. The twelve-foot-high glass doors burst in upon the lobby as the hail of bullets from the police guns bounced off the granite steps outside. Edgar Garrison fell to the floor and tried to shield his head with his arms. People screamed. Someone was crying. Millions of shards of glass pinged! on the marble floor. Bullets ricocheted off the marble-faced pillars that supported the vaulted lobby ceiling. And then silence as deep and as perfect as the silence under the sea descended on them. Edgar sprawled there for three or four minutes, shivering, waiting to be killed; and when he finally looked up, the bank was full of uniformed

men. They had a few questions to ask, but then they said he was free to go. When he went out through the ruined entrance, the ambulances were just arriving: slowly, without sirens. Four dead men were sprawled on the steps. They glistened with blood and reminded him of slabs of beef marinating in warm, red wine. He edged around them and turned his back on them, and twenty feet away he found his pay envelope where the wind had carried it. The white envelope was smeared with blood, but all of the bills were still clipped to it. And now, all these years later, as he sat on Annie Sherred's front porch and thought about Century Oaks, he kept seeing that damned envelope, those green bills spotted with blood. . . .

He picked up his beer and took a sip straight from the can. It was warm and brackish. He put it down, spat over the porch rail, and wiped the back of one hand across his mouth.

Out on the county road a car was rushing this way as fast as the cracked, holed, and hoveled-up macadam would allow. It was a low, dark number, and it cornered well; the engine growled like a pride of lions. A few seconds later, a battered black, five-year-old Corvette turned into the driveway and came up toward the house. The loose gravel crunched and rattled under it. As Annie drove past on her way to park in the barn, she smiled and waved at him through the open driver's window.

The engine cut out, and the peace of the countryside swept in like a broom of air.

The kitchen screen door opened, slammed.

A minute later, she stepped onto the front porch. She was still wearing the beige pantsuit and pimento scarf, and she was carrying two cans of cold beer. Thirsty?

Sure am, he said.

She stood in front of him. Pop my tab?

I'll pop your tab any time.

She grinned at him while he opened the cans. Then she took her beer and sat down in the bentwood rocker which faced his chair. She swallowed some of the beer. Her long, slender throat pulsed.

God, she's lovely! He said, Why so late?

Had a close call.

Trouble?

She shook her head: no. Her long auburn hair danced like the image of a flame seen through a misted glass. I wouldn't call it trouble exactly. It might have turned into trouble. But the way it went, it was only an inconvenience.

The phony press badge did work?

I didn't even have to use it. I just went up the steps to the fifth floor and down the hall and into that office. Did you see the striped scarf I

waved at you?

You won't need it on Saturday, he said. I could see you almost well enough to identify you.

From that distance?

Best binoculars in the world.

Marvelous.

Just wear something bright red or yellow on Saturday.

Will do.

Tell me the rest.

She sipped her beer first. Well, I stood there waving the scarf for two or three minutes until my arms got tired. Then I waited awhile and held it up again just in case you were a few minutes late getting onto the ridge. When I was ready to leave, the track publicity director came up to his office. His is right next door to the one I was hiding in.

But he didn't see you.

If he'd seen me I'd probably be in jail. Not even a million press badges would have explained what I was doing alone in a closed, dark, racetrack file room on Sunday afternoon.

I guess not.

She pulled her chair closer to his, sat down again, lifted her legs, and propped her sneakered feet on his knees. Finally the damned publicity man left. I gave him five minutes just to be sure he hadn't forgotten anything. When I was about to get out of there, someone else came down the hall and went into the track manager's office on the other side of me.

Regular parade.

You haven't heard it all. I waited for him to leave. He didn't. Instead, another guy joins him in the manager's office. They were in there maybe twenty minutes. I cooled it for ten minutes after that before I left the file room. And here I am.

I was worried, he said.

Needlessly.

Well, you were almost caught.

Almost isn't good enough.

You don't seem to be as nervous about this as I am.

Women have steadier nerves than men, she said.

I believe it.

Just the sight of her gradually steadied his nerves. Annie Sherred was a slender but shapely redhead who had celebrated her thirty-third birthday last week but who might have passed for twenty-three even without make up. She was not beautiful in any conventional sense. She didn't look like a model or a starlet. She had too many freckles for that. Her mouth was too wide and her nose was a bit too long for classic beauty. And her eyes . . . what incredible eyes! They were

enormous, round, with narrow lids that did not conceal their blue beauty. They were the wide, curious eyes of a fawn. She always looked as if she had just been startled, and she could not achieve the smoky, sultry, heavy-eyed look of a sex symbol. That was fine with Garrison. Her beauty was unique, all the better for its singularity.

I worry too much, he said.

Leads to heart attacks.

I guess maybe it'll work out fine.

No maybe about it! she said earnestly, her eyes wide and steady as she tried to convince him. Look here, Edgar, this is the most foolproof A gray Cadillac pulled into the driveway and came up the gentle hill toward the house. The late-afternoon sun struck the windshield, splashed brilliantly back, and made the occupants of the car invisible. Must be Willie, Garrison said. He lifted her feet from his knees and stood up.

Annie got up and followed him to the porch railing, put one arm around his waist.

The Cadillac stopped beside the porch. The window hummed down. Willie Denver grinned at them.

Better park in the barn, Garrison said.

Be discreet, Willie said.

Seems best.

Sure. Willie put up the power window and drove past the house, out of sight.

They went into the house, crossed the living room, walked down a short dark hall into the kitchen, where they met Willie and the other man at the back door.

Willie Denver thinks you're beautiful, Willie said, embracing Annie as soon as he was in the kitchen.

I think you're pretty nifty yourself, Annie said.

Willie Jacob Denver was a handsome little man, small enough to have been a jockey. He stood five-feet-four and weighed one-ten. At a glance, Garrison thought, you got the same impression of Willie as you did of most jockeys: fragility, delicacy. But when you took a closer look at the man, you saw the same things in Willie that you gradually perceived in a professional jockey: small but fiercely hard muscles, a hidden wiry strength, boldness, and endurance. His face was deeply tanned, marked with prominent laugh lines and deep creases across the forehead. Despite the creases, he did not look fifty-four years old. He had wavy black hair, energetic brown eyes, and teeth as white as starlight.

Letting go of Annie, Willie turned quickly and patted the shoulder of the man who had come in from New York City to talk about the heist. This is Lou Velinski. Lou, say hello to Annie Sherred and Edgar

Garrison.

They shook hands awkwardly.

Lou's an old friend, Willie said. Willie Denver's known him for twenty years. He's on our team.

Velinski was as unlike Willie as a moose is unlike a flea. He was a shade under six foot and weighed maybe three-twenty. His soft brown eyes were set in a flabby face. His nose was fat and white like a flower bulb. He had Alfred Hitchcock's jowls, a thick neck, heavy round shoulders, and an enormous stomach. His fingers were stubby and thick; light, crinkly hair grew between his knuckles and on the backs of his hands. Willie looked younger than he was, but Velinski was marked by every one of his years, at least fifty of them. Willie was quick, energetic, almost frenzied, but Lou Velinski was unhurried, unexcitable, almost stolid. Willie was dressed well in a light blue summer suit and a pale pink shirt and dark blue tie with two-hundred-dollar shoes, while Velinski looked as if he had slept in a seventy-five-dollar wardrobe from Robert Hall's. The fat man might have been quite unremarkable and even slightly repulsive except for one redeeming feature: his smile. He had the widest, most contagious, most sincere smile that Edgar had ever seen; and his musical, low-pitched voice was that of a man who thoroughly enjoyed life.

I can offer beer, Scotch, or gin and tonic, Annie said.

Gin and tonic, Willie said.

What Scotch do you have? Velinski asked.

Johnnie Walker. Red Label.

Fine.

When they all had their drinks, Garrison said, Let's go into the living room. We'll be more comfortable there.

Annie led the way, and Willie went close behind her, chattering amiably about the weather. As he followed Velinski, Garrison was surprised to see that, in spite of his size, the fat man seemed to float rather than walk; he was quiet and eerily graceful.

What a charming room, Velinski said, as he settled gently as a feather into the largest chair in what Annie was fond of calling the parlor.

I go to auctions, she said. Occasionally I get a bargain.

Like that Victorian oval mirror, Velinski said admiringly. You know, with these velvet-cushioned chairs, this wing-back I'm in, that lovely sofa, the sideboard, the dark wallpaper . . . it makes me think of The Wizard of Oz.

Annie was perplexed.

The movie, Velinski said. You remember it? The farmhouse at the beginning, where Dorothy lives. This room has the same charm as the front room of that farmhouse.

Lou's a movie nut, Willie said, vigorously stirring his drink with a

green plastic swizzle stick.
Are you really? Annie asked the fat man.
My one weakness.
She said, The drunken doctor in Stagecoach.
First version? Thomas Mitchell.
The sheriff?
George Bancroft.
Gypo Nolan?
Victor McLaglen.
The movie?
John Ford's The Informer, 1935.
Hallelujah. Who directed?
King Vidor. Too easy.
Who played the vamp?
The vamp?
The vamp.
He frowned. Tough one.
Caught you.
He grinned. Sorry. It was Nina Mae McKinney.
You knew all along.
I can't be stumped. His smile was huge.
Annie laughed and leaned against Garrison. They were both on the sofa, facing the two chairs where Willie and Velinski sat. You really do know your movies.
You aren't bad either, Velinski said.
You're both crazy, Willie said. But he was grinning too.
Velinski tasted his Scotch. Oh, I could go on like that for hours! But this is a business meeting, after all. He turned to Garrison. Why do you want to hold up a racetrack?
The sudden, cold, serious note in the fat man's voice caught Edgar off guard. Why?
You must have a reason.
Money.
Not good enough.
It is for Willie, Willie said.
There are easier ways of getting money, Lou said. Robbing a bank's easier than hitting a track. So it goes deeper than money. His deeply sunken eyes fixed Garrison and held him as if he were an insect specimen in a pair of tweezers. Why do you especially want to knock over a racetrack?
Because it's there?
Velinski just stared at him.
Okay, Edgar said, there's more to it than that.
I knew there was.

Garrison took a long swallow of his beer. I've worked in thoroughbred racing most of my life. Have a passion for it. Twenty years ago I started as a hot walker. Moved up fast. Groom. Assistant to a trainer. Did my apprenticeship. Started my own stable. Really built it into something, worked up until I was handling more than eighty horses, most of them big time bloodlines. My wife . . . my wife was a pony girl to start. She worked her way up just like I did. And that was back when women had a damned hard time of it. She was a good trainer. We got married. Combined the stable. We started buying horses of our own. There was a fire. Stable fire. Destroyed all our horses, most of the ones we handled . . .

Annie gripped his hand.

I still don't see the motivation, Velinski said.

We were in debt for those horses, Garrison continued, his eyes slightly glazed. We lost them, but the debts stayed with us. Banks got nasty. Damned wolves . . . We got assigned a few horses from owners we'd dealt with before. But people in this business are superstitious. Some of them didn't want to bring us any new mounts, as if we were jinxed. We managed anyway. Barely. In a while we bought a horse of our own. Then another. Started our stable all over again. We were just getting on our feet when a horse of ours turned up tranquilized at the end of a race. Golden Warlock. I liked the name. He lost so badly the stewards just had to order a urine test. Neither Helen nor I knew anything about the tranquilizers. Someone else doped him. We wanted him to win! It didn't matter whether we knew about it or not. We were implicated. Put on probation. Then it happened again. A horse of ours was shot full of speed, and he won. They have hard rules in racing. Real hard. A couple of the better-known owners, the wealthy ones, men who didn't like Helen or me, made sure we were barred from all training rights for a full year. We couldn't even get onto a track. We had to sell our mounts. It was bad.

Sounds bad, Willie said sympathetically.

Velinski waited.

Garrison said: We waited out the year and came back, dragging our debts behind us. Started as trainer and trainer's assistant. But we couldn't get the good horses. We had to take on the nags and the new flesh that hadn't proved itself. To keep our heads above water, we had to take on more horses than we could handle. Worked long hours. Moved the stock from track to track. Tried to cut in on a few good purses and rebuild our reputations. Too much work. Too much worry, and too little sleep. Helen . . . she got pneumonia. She died.

A grandfather clock ticked softly in one corner.

Willie Denver shifted from one buttock to the other, pulled himself up in his chair.

Revenge? Velinski asked.

Edgar pulled back from the past, refocused his eyes on the fat man.

Yes. And money.

That's a good combination, Velinski said. That sets well with me.

Greed's never enough. He sipped some Scotch. Now, I have a few questions.

Ask them.

You still working as a trainer?

No. I quit two weeks ago, when we began to get really serious about this thing.

Just walked out?

Notified the owners two weeks before that.

Velinski put down his glass and folded his hands on his belly. You've been thinking about this heist for quite a while.

Months.

Worked at Century Oaks, have you?

The last two years.

Know it well?

As well as I know horses.

How well's that?

I was a good trainer.

The grandfather clock chimed the half hour. The fat man cocked his head and listened to the tolling as if he were a connoisseur of music and the clock were an orchestra. When the last note was struck, he smiled and said, Lovely. Then he locked eyes with Garrison and said, How'd you come to know Willie?

Hasn't Willie told you?

I want it from you.

I met him through Annie, Edgar said.

Velinski shifted his attention to the woman. And how did you ever get connected with a disreputable man like Willie?

Hey! Willie said.

Joking, Lou Velinski said, reaching out to pat the little man's arm.

I used to work as a waitress, Annie said.

Where?

Harrisburg.

And Willie came in a lot?

Annie smiled. Every day, six days a week. The food was very good, and the prices were reasonable.

And Willie Denver had a crush on her, Willie said happily. But it never worked. Difference in ages. Willie Denver's too damned young for her. He smiled at Annie and winked.

And just on a lark you mentioned this idea of a racetrack heist to Willie? Velinski asked.

Jesus, he's relentless, Garrison thought. What is it with this character? Why's he pressing it like this?

Not on a lark, Annie said quietly. I knew Willie might be interested. How'd you know?

Well, he served time for armed robbery, she said. In my mind that made him a more likely accomplice than a minister or the cop on the corner or one of the waitresses I worked with.

How'd you know he was an ex-con?

He told me, Annie said.

Willie Denver stood up and downed the last of his gin and tonic. Of course Willie Denver told her. It's nothing to be ashamed of. A person can be a great thief and that's just as good as being a great lawyer or doctor or something. If a person takes a fall okay, even two falls that doesn't mean a person has to hang his head in shame!

Lou Velinski sighed heavily and wiped one pudgy hand across his pudgy face. Annie, didn't he tell you he was retired? If he takes another fall, they'll throw the key away.

He told me that, she said. But I had the feeling that he was really looking for something. A sure thing. Or the next best thing to a sure thing.

You pegged him well, Velinski said.

Willie Denver is going to get some more gin and tonic, Willie said. He asked Annie: You mind?

Of course not, Willie.

Velinski picked up a half-sphere of heavy glass that rested on the lamp table beside him. He peered at the tiny Eskimo scene frozen inside the glass, and then he shook it vigorously and watched the snowflakes swirl in the encapsulated arctic. Haven't seen one of these in ages.

The good ones, the old ones, are hard to find, Annie said.

Putting the glass piece down, Velinski said, Edgar's motives are simple. Revenge and money. Why are you in this?

I don't see why she has to explain herself, Garrison said angrily. Take it from me she's got good reasons. There's no need for you to put her through

I don't mind, Annie said, taking his hand and squeezing it. Lou, I don't know what kind of home you were raised in

Not much of one.

She nodded. Okay. Well, I was raised in a home that was about as traditional, conservative, all-American, live-by-the-rules as you could find. I grew up thinking the world was fair, that God was good, and that you could always trust the government. When I was twenty-one, I married Joe Sherred. I loved him as much as Edgar loved his Helen. We had three fantastic years together. We bought this farm with an inheritance of his. He was an English teacher with a minor in drama.

We were going to gut the barn and turn it into a theater. Ah, the plans we had! And then when he was twenty-five and I was twenty-four, he was drafted. He wasn't a Quaker, but he was a conscientious objector. You'd never meet a more gentle man. But that didn't wash with the United States Army. He couldn't get a CO deferment. And when he was drafted, they wouldn't give him stateside duty. They wouldn't even assign him to a medical unit in Vietnam. They had to send him as a foot soldier.

Velinski frowned. Why didn't he refuse to go?

She laughed bitterly and squeezed Garrison's hand harder than ever. He was raised in a family like mine. He believed in the benevolence of authority. He respected government. He didn't want to go, but he would never have contemplated disobedience. Never.

And he was killed?

His head was blown off.

Edgar winced at that blunt phrasing, although he had heard her use the same words before. She was not the sort of woman who tried to evade a painful truth; she would never get any consolation out of euphemisms.

Coming back from the kitchen with a fresh drink, Willie said, Glad to have missed that. Willie's heard it before, and he kept dreaming about it for weeks. He sat down.

Your husband was killed. I can understand you'd want revenge, Velinski said. But you'd want it against the government, not some racetrack.

What I want revenge against is authority, Annie said. Any authority. The racing world gave Edgar a rotten deal. So that's a good enough target for me.

The fat man finished his Scotch and put his glass down. And the money?

Her eyes widened like the eyes of a gazelle that had just spotted a lion in the grass. Oh, I want that money. When you're rich, you can't be touched. Money buys power. Did you ever hear of a rich man's son dying in a war or going to jail?

Changing the subject without warning, as he had already done several times, Velinski turned to Edgar and said, Willie tells me Century Oaks has one of the best security systems in the sport. So why would we want to hit the place?

Because the security system is complicated, Garrison said, sliding forward on the sofa, choosing his words with care. And the more complicated a thing gets, the easier it is to throw it out of whack. For instance . . . the more and more logic circuits and memory banks you put into a computer, the more work it can do, the faster it can calculate. But at the same time, there are ten thousand new things

that might go wrong with it. I have a way around the security system at Century Oaks.

And there's Sweepstakes Week, Willie said.

Right, Garrison said. Century Oaks has been losing money right along. This is its fourth year. New manager. Big plans. The big sweepstakes race on Saturday will have a four-hundred-thousand-dollar purse. It'll be covered on ABC's Wide World of Sports. The management's taking a gamble, hoping to put the track on the map so it can draw more people from Philadelphia and Jersey. Whether it will work over the long run, I don't know. But it's sure to pack them in on Saturday. There's going to be millions in the cash room this Saturday. Millions. And you're still working as a waitress? Velinski asked.

I quit last week, Annie said.

What did you tell them?

That I couldn't make ends meet, she said. They know I own the farm. So I told them I was going to sell it and move out west somewhere. I kept it vague.

The fat man nodded approvingly. Only one thing worried him, he said. Edgar's known at Century Oaks. We can take steps to disguise him. But it isn't as easy to disguise a pretty woman.

I've never been on the track, Annie said. I don't know any of the people Edgar worked with.

Velinski raised his eyebrows.

I wanted it that way, even before we started talking about this heist, Edgar said. I didn't want her at the track. Helen died because of racing, all that . . . I guess maybe I'm superstitious too.

Good enough, the fat man said. He picked up his whiskey glass and leaned forward in his chair. His stomach rolled up almost to his chin. Do you think I could have another Scotch?

Certainly. Annie got up and took his glass.

As quickly as that, the tension drained away. Velinski was no longer hard-voiced. His eyes were not as narrow and cold as they had been a moment ago. He was just a big, grinning, white-haired Santa Claus without a beard.

I'll take one last beer, Edgar said.

Willie Denver jumped out of his chair. Willie will help in the kitchen, Annie. He scuttled along behind her.

The ticking of the grandfather clock became audible once more. . . . Leaning back on the sofa and crossing his long legs, Edgar said, What's your motive?

The fat man produced one of his beautiful smiles. Merry wrinkles formed at the corners of his eyes. Money.

That's not good enough. You pumped me, now it's my turn to pump you.

Fair enough, I suppose, Velinski said. You see, I've always been fat. Since I was nine or ten, anyway. You miss out on a lot of experiences when you're fat all your life. Games and friends. Women. Fortunately, a whore now and then satisfies me on that score. Or I pretend that it does. Anyway, when you're denied experiences you have a difficult time defining yourself. Most people who are as gross as I am define themselves in terms of their weight: I am a fat person. And that's it. They're constantly dieting to change it, dressing to hide it, or sulking at the injustice of it but they spend all their time being fat. That's never been enough for me. Since there aren't many people who'd hire me, my job choices are limited. The jobs I could get are all bland; none of them would help define me. Crime defines me. As Willie said a while ago, if you're a great thief you've got nothing to be ashamed about. He laughed. Despite the fact that Willie took two falls, he's a great thief. He got away with a hundred jobs for each time they nailed him. And I'm even better.

Garrison felt certain that Velinski wasn't just boasting. The man would be a damned good thief. He seemed intelligent and cautious, and those two qualities made for fairly good insurance against disaster. You've spent a lot of time psychoanalyzing yourself, haven't you?

Years.

Where did you learn to interrogate?

Lou smiled expansively. He shifted in the wing-back chair, and he was like a whale wallowing in the sea. Old movies. Detective movies. I'm not just a trivia buff, you know. I try to learn from the cinema.

Laughter echoed in from the kitchen.

What about Willie? Garrison asked.

What about him?

What motivates him?

Don't worry, Velinski said. I know him well. He's got his reasons, and they're sound ones for him.

Garrison thought about that a moment. The same reasons why he never says 'I' or 'me'?

I think so.

And you won't tell me?

Ask Willie.

Brushing his shaggy hair off his forehead, Garrison said, You know that's impossible. He's such a damned likeable little cuss. I couldn't cut into him that deep.

The fat man's smile metamorphosed into a sad frown. He picked up the glass piece and shook snow down on the Eskimo village. You don't think or talk as I expected.

Oh?

You're much too clever and too literate for a horse trainer. And she's

too sharp for a waitress.

She wasn't always a waitress, Garrison said. Besides, you don't talk like a cheap crook.

Lou smiled.

No offense.

None taken, the fat man said. I've never been cheap. But you're right.

We get absolutely nowhere when we think in stereotypes.

I guess you'll want to hear the details of the plan as it stands now.

No, Velinski said, watching the snow in the glass. We might as well wait until the whole gang's assembled. Tomorrow's soon enough.

Then you're definitely in it?

Velinski nodded. I suppose. I want to be filthy rich.

And well defined.

That too.

Four

The moment Jack Killigan walked into his fifth-floor office, the telephone rang. It set his teeth on edge, even though it made only a soft burring noise. Christ, what was wrong now? He picked up the receiver.

Cash room, Mr. Killigan, said the man on the other end of the line.

The count's been made.

Killigan looked at his wristwatch and saw that an hour had passed since the finish of the ninth and last race of the day. Where in the hell did the time go? I'll be right down, he told the guard. He hung up.

Was there time to spare for a drink?

Hialeah . . .

He left the office and walked down the hall toward the main stairs. He could have taken the elevator, but he liked to walk through the building when it was nearly deserted, much like a king inspecting his castle with quiet pride. The building was certainly as large as any castle ever built. With its enormous public concourses, offices, betting areas, restaurants, and lounges, it was the largest roofed sports complex in Pennsylvania. A manager might feel kingly herebut he also had a king's responsibilities.

During the last four and a half months, Killigan had worked fourteen hours a day every day of the week. He had supervised the remodeling of the Horsemen's Club as well as the refurbishing, sandblasting, and painting of the rest of the building. He had dismissed the track's old advertising agency and located a new firm that had more modern concepts. He changed insurance companies, renewed the deal with Agroco, negotiated the concessions deals for the three restaurants and twelve snack counters, argued the Racing Commission into giving him fifty extra racing days that had once belonged to a now-defunct track in the Poconos, hired Mickey Ginchey, laid off excess employees,

personally sold half the tables in the Horsemen's Club as well as two hundred of the eight hundred box seats in the clubhouse, supervised the remodeling of the restrooms, settled a brief labor dispute in March, spoke without fee at forty different social clubs and charitable organizations within the area, and fought with the track's board of directors for more and more money, hundreds of other things, a madhouse of details. . . .

The arguments with the board of directors had been the worst moments of the year thus far. He tried to convince them that, while Century Oaks had been a losing proposition for each of its first three years, they had to pour more money down the rabbit hole if they were ever to see the Easter Bunny. Their penurious attitude was understandable, since they had already thrown millions into the operation. But they gradually began to see the truth of his position. He had tried to help them by generating more revenue from the track. He had hired it out in March for a Camping and Outdoors show. In April, a consortium of county and city charities had rented the clubhouse building for a five-day indoor carnival which had been enormously successful. Because Monday evenings were bad for horse racing, every Monday after Sweepstakes Week would be reserved for stock car races. And once the owners had consented to the Sweepstakes Week promotion, Killigan had managed to sell television rights to the big race to ABC's Wide World of Sports for a clean \$65,000. That had shut them up for a couple of weeks. Jesus, it was only a fraction of what they were putting up for the promotion, but they were thrilled at the idea of their track on television. . . . Even now he was trying to negotiate the sale of three hundred acres of the track's land to a developer who wanted to build extremely expensive condominium apartments near the track. If that went through to the owners' satisfaction, maybe the carping and bitching would finally stop. He had to get the owners completely off his back. Over the last few months he had barely been able to cope with them and still handle the day-to-day business of Century Oaks. And now that the track was open for racing, the day-to-day details were going to get much more burdensome than they had ever been.

At ten minutes past six o'clock, Killigan pushed open a black door stenciled with red letters no public admittance at the west end of the first floor of the building, and went down dark concrete steps to the basement. When he entered the wide main corridor, the security camera which was suspended from the ceiling midway down the hall was just swinging in his direction. The lens focused on him, went past him smoothly as he approached it, and continued its full-circle observation of the gray concrete corridor.

At the steel door to the cash room, Killigan removed from his wallet a

credit-card-sized rectangle of thin white plastic. He slid the card into the lock slot of the door. The track's computer which also dealt with the tote board, mutual ticket dispensers, payroll, and a dozen other jobs in addition to security approved the card, ejected it into his hand, and rolled the door back for him.

He went inside.

The cash room indeed, the entire complex system of moving cash to and from the mutual windows and from all other points on the racetrack was more sophisticated at Century Oaks than at any other track in the country. Even before the architects had begun work on the designs for the main plant, a large New York security firm, Pro-Teck Systems, had come to the owners and offered to install their best equipment at cost in exchange for only two considerations: first of all, the architects would have to accept pointers from the Pro-Teck experts even if it meant sacrificing a piece of eye-pleasing design; secondly, the track would take a number of mutually agreed steps to publicize its use of this Pro-Teck system. Therefore, the cash room was in the basement instead of on the fifth floor or one of the clubhouse levels. The forty-foot-square room contained a television monitor that provided the guards with a picture of the entire basement corridor except for an area immediately in front of the cash room door. No one could approach the door without the guards noticing him; and once at the door, no one could enter unless the guards recognized and admitted him or unless he owned one of the few top security key cards in existence.

Beyond these few futuristic touches, the cash room at Century Oaks was not much different from that at any other track. It was furnished with half a dozen desks and straight-backed chairs, five battered, padded captain's chairs and a card table for the guards, strongboxes, bank bags hanging on racks along one wall, coin-counting machines, rows of bill trays marked for different denominations, an electronic calculator on each desk, and one in-house telephone. A small electric refrigerator full of soft drinks hummed noisily in one corner. The walls were concrete; the ceiling was white acoustical tile, and the floor was covered with an inexpensive blue carpeting to take the chill from the cement. It was a spare room, somewhat dreary, but efficiently organized.

The five Melkins-Peterson guards nodded and said hello.

Killigan went to the end desk where Leroy Franson, the track accountant, was busy with the tally sheets. How far in debt are we today, Leroy?

The accountant looked up from his papers and smiled. He was a bony, broad-faced black man with watery brown eyes and a bristling natural haircut. Not bad, Jack. You have to remember it's opening day. And a

lot of people are holding off today because they're going to come out several times during Sweepstakes Week.

Hope you're right.

I am.

What's today's bitter pill?

Not bitter really, Franson said. A little better than an average day.

Attendance was slightly over the eight thousand mark.

Drawn in from Philly.

Big day for the buses.

The handle?

Just over a million and a quarter.

Passable.

Franson nodded. If we didn't have to give ten percent of our gross to charity today . . .

Killigan also wished that the gesture were not necessary. But this part of Pennsylvania was in the Bible Belt, and it contained a sizeable minority of extremely vocal religionists who were hell on sin of any sort. Except their own. As this year's opening had drawn near, several fundamentalist ministers in Harrisburg, Lancaster, York, and Hershey had denounced Century Oaks and threatened to have pickets working at its entrances. The quickest way to put these holier-than-thou name-callers in a corner, Killigan thought, was to involve the track in a bit of opening-day charity work and then to publicize it to death.

Like most people, these ministers totally misunderstood the finances of a racetrack. They read in the newspapers that the track handled \$1,250,000, and they thought it was all profit. Actually, state law, as it now stood, allowed the track to keep only fifteen percent of the handle; they returned eighty-five percent to the bettors in the form of winnings at the end of each race. Furthermore, the track had to pass along five percent of the handle to the state. Of the \$1,250,000 that went through the mutuel windows, Century Oaks retained \$125,000, ten percent. However, the track's agreement with the Horsemen's Association specified that \$60,000, an even forty-eight percent, be set aside for purse money in future races. Another \$40,000 went toward the day's payroll. That left only \$25,000 to apply toward the lease on the tote board, the lease on the computer, the interest and principal payments on the enormous mortgage, and the maintenance costs. If it were even to tread water in this deep pool, Century Oaks Race Course needed a handle in the neighborhood of \$1,250,000, no less than a million.

Three years ago that had not been true. Nor even two years ago. But with the sky-rocketing inflation of the Nixon years and the track's inability to inflate a two-dollar bet to match its own expenses a bigger and bigger handle was needed just to keep the wolves at bay.

And today, more than twelve thousand of the handle would be given to area charities, a slice out of the pie which might leave the bakers themselves without a bite to eat.

Naturally, the track made money in other areas. And it was from these incidentals that most of the profits accrued.

Gate receipts? Killigan asked.

Franson looked at the figures. After you discount the passes, we made nearly eighty-five hundred from the clubhouse and twelve thousand from the grandstand.

Parking?

Fourteen hundred and eighty-eight dollars.

Program sales?

About fifteen hundred.

Breakage?

When payoffs were calculated they often ended in odd cents; therefore, to save the cashiers time, payoffs were rounded down to the dime. As a result loose change quickly accumulated. This was called the Breakage and was split fifty-fifty between the track and the state. On a bad day, the Breakage could sometimes mean the difference between a slim loss and the break-even point.

Franson leafed through his papers, searching for the figure. Here we are. Close to thirty-four hundred.

Did the concessions and restaurants do well?

Everyone was hungry and thirsty, Franson said.

Both men knew that these last figures did not matter that much, at least not for the moment. The track's royalty from the food concessions, applied against advances already in hand, would not affect the overall financial picture of the day.

They talked for a few moments about the ticket forger operating at Century Oaks. Because there were always un-cashed tickets, and because the theft had thus far been small when compared with the large sums moving through the mutuel windows, the day's records didn't show anything wrong. They had been hurt, but not that bad just yet.

He'll get greedy later in the week, Killigan said.

And that's when the TRPB will nail him, Franson said. These guys all make a mistake, sooner or later.

Killigan smiled grimly. That's what Cooper keeps telling me. I wish I could be sure.

Anyway, Franson said, forgery artist or not, we appear to have made a modest profit on opening day.

The day's not over yet.

Things going wrong?

Agroco's on strike. Didn't bother to tell us until Mickey called to find

out why they hadn't been around for the muckings. I can't get through to their top man, Simpson. So maybe I'm going to have to hire someone else.

Who?

Don't know yet.

The guard who was monitoring the security system television screen said, Here come the boys from Protective Courier. He put one hand on an alarm switch, just in case the approaching guards were impostors. Killigan watched the three uniformed men walk down the long basement hall toward the door to the cash room. The camera suspended from the hall ceiling panned them slowly and continued its circular surveillance.

A moment later, the senior man from Protective Courier used a plastic key card to open the cash room door. One armed man remained in the hall, while the other PC guards came inside to collect the gray canvas bank bags full of money.

Killigan admired the way the armored car guards operated. They were quick, polite, efficient, and they looked as trustworthy as priests.

Between them, the TRPB, the Melkins-Peterson guards, and the Pro-Teck system, Century Oaks Race Course was as safe as a Swiss bank. At least, with everything else on his mind, he did not have to worry about robbery.

By nine o'clock Sunday night, Jack Killigan admitted to himself that he could not solve the problems of the constantly growing compost heap any sooner than Monday morning. He had made a list of trucking, farming, and fertilizer companies, but they were all closed today. And when he could get the right home telephone numbers, he found that people either didn't want to talk to him on their day off, were unable to help him even if they didn't mind the intrusion, or were away for the weekend. The horseshit, he thought, was just going to have to continue to pile up for another day.

He suddenly laughed out loud.

Wasn't that life, really the horseshit just piling up day by day?

He finished the bourbon in his glass, went into the bathroom that adjoined his office, and rinsed out the glass. Then he bent down to the sink and splashed cold water in his face. When he had used the towel, he stared at his reflection in the mirror and saw that he had wrinkles that had not been there a few days ago. Behind his face, beyond his face, he saw an infinite weariness that had been seeded and cultured here at Century Oaks, a deeper weariness than any he had ever known.

Switching off the bathroom light, he went back into his office and returned the freshly washed whiskey tumbler to the rack above the bookshelf bar. He took his raincoat from a peg on the wall behind the

door, draped it over his left arm, turned out more lights, and went down to the staff exit on the first floor, near the paddock.

Bert Runlon, one of the two retired policemen who worked as night watchman in the main track building, was waiting there to let him out and to lock up behind him. Runlon was in his late fifties, thin though not skinny, gray-haired; and thanks to two bullets he had taken in the stomach when he was fifty-two, he moved with exaggerated caution, as if walking on a sugar glaze that was cracking under him. Long day, Mr. Killigan.

Well, Bert, at least I didn't slit my throat.

But you were tempted, huh?

I had the knife all sharpened.

Runlon laughed.

Don't let anyone steal the clubhouse chairs, Bert.

I'm not worried about them, Runlon said as Killigan stepped onto the concrete apron outside. It's this ring of international water fountain thieves has me worried.

It was Killigan's turn to laugh. Goodnight, Bert.

Sleep well, Mr. Killigan.

His new, white Thunderbird was parked in the first bay of the executive lot. He belted in, started the engine, and drove slowly home, taking plenty of time to relax. The purr of the big engine, the smell of new upholstery, and the soft green glow of the dashboard lights all soothed him. He could let out his breath, shake off his worries, and enjoy himself when he drove. Even in a busy city, even in midtown Manhattan at rush hour, Jack Killigan could relax behind the wheel of a car. It was, after all, the only time of the day when a man could feel completely in control. . . .

At a quarter of ten, he pulled the Thunderbird into his driveway and parked in front of the white frame, two-car garage. He put down the window and cut the engine and listened to the crickets and frogs; those were the only noises besides an occasional ping! as the car cooled down to disturb the night silence.

He had been fortunate in finding the house. Although this part of Pennsylvania was one of the fastest-growing regions in the East, the rental situation was abysmal. Generally, the only things available were dozens of garden apartments in look-alike complexes where the walls between neighbors were too thin to stop more than a whisper. The houses for rent were either tumble-down bargains or cramped little ranch homes squeezed into postage-stamp lots in neighborhoods that might have been pressed whole out of plastic. The place he had lucked into was a rambling, frame country house with ten rooms and two baths, put up for a two-year lease by a retired doctor and his wife who were going off on an extended around-the-world tour. The house

had come well furnished and well maintained. There were neighbors, though none closer than four hundred yards. When the nights were clear like this and the crickets trilled in time with the croaking frogs, he felt that he could live here forever.

As he got out of the car, he realized for the first time that a single lamp was on in the living room and that the small bulb in the hood over the stove softly illuminated the kitchen at the back of the house. He stood at the open kitchen door, peered through the screen door, and listened to the Benny Goodman music that drifted out from the front room.

Rita was waiting for him.

In the kitchen he dropped his raincoat over the back of a chair. Then he went through the large dining room, through an archway, into the living room.

Well, at last, she said. She had a soft, throaty voice which came naturally to her. I was beginning to think you were going to sleep in your office.

Rita Janifer was the most beautiful woman Killigan had ever known. And in the Biblical sense alone, he had known dozens. She was tall, five-eight, just about his own height when she wore heels. Beyond that, she was difficult to describe. Her incredible beauty was unclassifiable. What had always drawn him to her, like a sailor steering helplessly toward a siren on the rocks, was a sweet air of corruption. Just looking at her, you knew that she had done unspeakable things and would do them all again because she liked them, that she had a dark and fundamental knowledge of the underside of life, and that she would always know more about sexin both its beautiful and ugly manifestation than any man could ever know. However, in spite of her Mephistophelean aura, she bore no visible scars of the jaded sophisticate, no physical traces of her many indulgences. Her complexion was as clear and refreshing as mountain water, her color slightly dusky and warm. At thirty, after fifteen years of spoiled childhood and fifteen more years of damned hard living, she had no wrinkles, lines, or puffiness about the eyes. No dying or teasing comb or special preparation had ever touched her hair; it was thick, long, black, as shiny blue-black as a raven's feathers. While they had been punished by countless, sleepless bacchanalian nights, her eyes were clear, untainted, so dark that it did not matter if they were brown or black. Her nose was delicate and slightly upturned with nostrils like vents in crystalline seashells. With lips so ripe they were almost obscene and teeth as white and perfect as a ten-thousand-dollar capping job, her subtlest smile bore a shocking, sensuous impact.

Incredible, Killigan thought as he stood in the archway and looked at

her. She has it. All of it. She's the rest of them put together. Harlow. Russell. Garbo. Veronica Lake. Lamarr. Astor. Dietrich. Monroe, Mansfield, Raquel Welsh. . . . Better than the rest of Hollywood's sex images rolled into one.

What in the hell could have gone wrong with her movie career? She had been discovered when she was twenty-two. Her first film, a bad one, was released two years later. The movie bombed, but everyone noticed Rita. The next seven films were mediocre, but they made good money at the box office strictly because Rita starred in them. She had been on her way, very much on her way. And now for two years there had been no new movies released, none in production, just some vague talk about reading scripts and looking for the right property. Are you with the living, Jack?

What?

Don't just stand there, for Christ's sake!

Sorry.

You were looking at me like a zombie.

I'm too tired to think straight.

It was creepy. Sit down. Relax.

He walked across the living room to the conversation corner and sat in a big, square, contemporary chrome and fake-fur chair. It was a bad day, that's all.

That's why I had the bourbon ready. She pointed to the ice bucket, tongs, clean tumbler, and bottle of Wild Turkey which stood on the steel-framed rectangle of heavy glass that served as a coffee table. She was drinking bourbon herself; the glass in her hand was full, but it was certainly not her first of the night. After he had a drink of his own, she said, Tell me about it.

He talked about Century Oaks as if it were a story that he had read, a second-hand experience. Whenever he was with her, all else seemed unreal to him, unimportant.

She was reclining on the fake-fur sofa, propped up by bolster pillows. Although Killigan had always thought that the ultramodern furniture seemed out of place in a retired doctor's country home, it went well with Rita. She was wearing a silky white sheath that clung to her like moss to the earth; the thin straps bared her shoulders, and the deep neckline displayed the lovely curves of her heavy, round breasts. The swollen nipples were outlined by the thin material. She was thoroughly modern, very with it, sleek, new, and desirable.

Poor dear, she said when he finished talking. My day was just dull. Tell me anyway.

She held out her glass. Whiskey.

He poured more for both of them. When she took her drink, she held his hand for a long moment and stared into his eyes and gave him, for

the millionth time, that feeling of falling helplessly down a dark but not unpleasant tunnel to hell. Then, sensing how easily she could affect him, she smiled and leaned back and let go of his hand.

I slept until noon, she said. Wasted the afternoon. And then Daddy had this dinner party. That's why I'm so elegantly dressed tonight. But the dinner party was a bore. All people in racing, you know. Rich people. Breeders. Owners. It was a convention of assholes.

He no longer winced at her locker-room vocabulary. She had used the same language when she was sixteen, the first time he had ever gone to bed with her. Then, each syllable had affected him like a pretty nun baring her breasts; he had been both disgusted and aroused. Now, he was merely aroused.

Killigan swallowed a lot of bourbon. So you walked out in the middle of the dinner party.

How did you guess?

You're always walking out in the middle of your father's dinner parties.

She put her head back and laughed. Her breasts strained softly against the silk, nosed up sweetly. . . . I was most polite about it, she said. I turned to the gentleman seated on my right, and I said, 'Excuse me, please. I don't want to seem rude, but I simply cannot tolerate any more of this crap.' Then I left.

Why do you hate your father?

I don't.

Yes. You do.

He's dull.

That's not it.

Fuck off, she said. The emotion in her eyes was too fierce to be hatred; it was a stark, hideous loathing. It came and went in an instant, but he had seen it and been chilled by it. Once she had taken a taste of her drink she was smiling again. I came over here and let myself in to wait for you. Got bored here too. So I turned on the radio and found one of them talk shows. Where people call in? Jesus, what a riot. It was that Jerry Williams thing from Boston. He had assholes calling him from all around the country. Idiots down in Virginia who wanted to tell him how to solve all our problems. Some old bitch from Maine who has this thing about religion in politics. You should have heard it! Who in the hell are these nuts who phone into shows like that?

He shrugged. Just lonely people.

Lonely?

Sure.

They're nuts.

You were listening.

I didn't call in! she said. She was suddenly furious with him. This was

going to be one of her quicksilver nights, one of those exhausting nights of which he already had endured too many. I didn't get on the horn and call up old Williams and tell him to find God through the Republican Party! She sat up, stiff, straight, trembling, her face pale. Are you saying I'm like them?

Of course not, he said placatingly.

I'm not lonely.

I didn't say you were.

The hell with you.

Calm down.

Well, just the hell with it.

He didn't say anything.

She finished her drink and handed him the glass. More.

He leaned forward on his chair, got fresh ice cubes and whiskey, without pouring more for himself.

You too, she said.

I don't need it.

Her voice was suddenly shrill again. Dammit, don't you turn into a bore too!

Okay, okay, he said. He poured himself more bourbon.

Pushing her black hair out of her eyes, she said, It's a beautiful night, isn't it?

Only the dimmest of the three bulbs in the floor lamp was lit.

Shadows covered most of the room. Through the nearest window, the starry spring sky was visible. The crickets are really singing tonight, he said.

Are they? I haven't heard them. I got tired of the radio show, so I put on some Benny Goodman. She stood up. I'd like to listen to the crickets for a while.

Now?

They're singing now, aren't they? Her lovely face brightened as if a switch had been thrown. Hey, I got a better idea!

What's that?

She slid the white straps off her shoulder and somehow wriggled out of the dress. She wasn't wearing anything underneath. Her upturned breasts jiggled slightly. Her waist was pinched, her hips full, her long legs exquisitely shaped. The thick black pubic thatch looked like a nest of tightly curled licorice strands.

That's a much better idea, he said thickly.

You haven't heard it all yet, she said. She picked up the bourbon, jammed the bottle down between the ice cubes in the bucket. She picked up the bucket and her glass. Bring your drink. We'll make a really natural night of it, a real nature-loving night of it. We'll go out on the lawn and listen to the crickets and look at the stars and get

drunk and then fuck like bunny rabbits.

Rita

She had already crossed to the living room archway. She moved with that casual, stunning, hip-swinging, haunch-rolling, long-striding grace that was, he often thought, the only facet of her beauty of which she was unaware. It was the sensual but self-assured walk of a girl who had grown up in open spaces, riding horses. She turned and said, What are you waiting for?

The neighbors

You want to make a gangbang of it? she asked, feigning shock, her mouth an O of surprise.

You know what I mean.

She laughed. They won't see. They can't see. It's dark out there, no moon, just stars. And the nearest house is at least a fourth of a mile up the road.

It's a childish notion, he said.

Then I guess I'm childish, she said. I'm going outside to sit in the grass and drink bourbon and listen to crickets. If you finally decide to join me, you're welcome. She went saucily across the dining room, into the kitchen.

The screen door slammed.

Jesus! Killigan said.

He finished his bourbon and went upstairs. He undressed in the bedroom, put on pajama bottoms, then went into the bathroom to wash his face. When he went downstairs again, she was still out there on the rear lawn somewhere.

What's the matter with you, Killigan? Why put up with her? Why let her work at you like this?

He stretched out on the living room sofa where she had lain just minutes ago. He fancied that he could still sense the body warmth that she had left behind, and he had an erection.

When he closed his eyes, his mind was riotous with thoughts and images of Rita. . . . And when he ordered and made sense of them, he was faced with two questions. Why do I cling to her when I know she'll ruin me? He had wanted her from the moment he first saw her. He was thirty-six, in his first year at Hialeah, the youngest track manager in thoroughbred racing, a real whiz kid. Her father was W. Kane Janifer, breeder and owner of thoroughbred race horses, heir to three hundred million dollars. Rita was sixteen, fully bloomed, and even then she had that corrupt air about her, that fascinating worldliness. Her father owned a farm in Pennsylvania and a breeding ranch in Florida. When she came south with her father, she spent all her time with Killigan. During school vacations, when her father was away in Europe or at another end of the country, she made excuses to

the maid who was to look over her, and she came to Florida, and she came after Killigan. He was a vigorous man, but she wore him out, always at him, feeling him, using him, letting him use her. It was cold, sometimes emotionless, but it was always interesting. It had continued through college, even through most of her career in the movies. And he loved it. Even after he lost Hialeah, he loved it. Through the years, he'd lost none of his desire. And, strangely, neither had she. After two years of silence, she was back, trying to get it cooking again, putting him at a boil again. And that brought him to the second question.

Why does she want me? She was rich, famous, and stunningly beautiful. By beckoning, she could have any man she wanted. Killigan knew he was attractive to women, but this was something else. For God's sake, he was old enough to be her father!

Two questions.

He didn't have an answer to either of them.

He got up from the sofa and went into the kitchen, stood by the screen door and studied the rear lawn. Rita?

She giggled. Feeling in a nature-loving mood?

When he strained his eyes, he could see her starlit silhouette under the willow tree, fifty feet from the porch.

You coming in? he asked.

Oh, really, Jack.

Be reasonable.

I'll spend the whole night here.

I want you to come in.

And I want you to come sit in the dew.

This is crazy, he said.

Nice crazy, though.

He pushed open the screen door.

Wait a minute! she said. I can see you. You should have turned off the kitchen light. I see you're wearing your jammies. She giggled again, an unsettling sound that quieted the crickets.

Rita

Off with them! she said. You come out here with clothes on, I'll cry rape. I really will.

Hating himself for giving in to her, he took off the pajama bottoms. Oh, she said, that's lovely.

The grass was wet beneath his feet, and when he sat beside her the dew chilled his buttocks and sent a brief chain of shivers up his spine. But the night air was warm despite the breeze, and the air was as clean as hospital whites.

Bourbon, she said, thrusting a glass into his hand.

I'm dizzy enough.

Take it.

I'll have a hangover.
So you'll take Anacins.
He accepted the bourbon.
Now listen to the crickets, she said.
I'm listening.
Ssshhh!
The night was silent.
Finally, a frog croaked.
Then a cricket chirruped. Another cricket. A dozen of them, hundreds,
singing and singing in counterpoint to the frogs.
She rattled the ice in her glass, quietly poured more whiskey for both
of them.
Nice out here, he said.
To hell with the crickets, she said.
Putting her glass aside she reached between his legs and found him
and manipulated him.
He caressed her breasts. They were heavy and full, not marshmallowy
as some women's breasts were. Every inch of her was firm,
resilientdemanding.
She stretched out on the grass and put her head in his lap and kissed
him there.
Nice.
Lovely prick.
Crickets sang.
You do that well.
I've had practice, dear.
Lots of it.
'Thousands.
Let's use it now.
Going to.
Now, he said.
She pushed him back and straddled him and guided him into her and
sighed as he took her all the way. She grabbed his hands and brought
them to her breasts and helped him massage her as she moved upon
him. Her breasts were wet with dew, and her hips moved frantically,
and her body was hot, fiercely hot, pressing down on him, full length
on him now, her breasts against his chest now, moving and moving
and moving.
When it was over, she said, Bourbon time.
They sat against the broad tree trunk and sipped the whiskey without
any need to talk.
Sometime during the long night, he said, We go together well, don't
we?
Hand and glove.

Why?

You don't know?

No.

I can guess.

Tell me.

We're both decadent.

He said, That's not true.

Well, I am.

Am what?

Decadent, of course. Darling, you are too drunk for this heavy conversation.

He shook his head. I'm not drunk. Can't be drunk. I've got to have a clear head tomorrow.

You will.

He watched the stars spin around overhead. No. No, I don't think I'll have a clear head at all.

Sure. We'll burn that alcohol out of you. She took the glass out of his hand.

What time is it?

Who cares?

Should be getting to bed.

Get to me first, she said.

Rita, I'm a little scared.

Scared? Of what?

Us.

We're hand and glove. Remember?

He sighed as her arms went around him. He rolled onto her and settled between the silken trap of her thighs and thrust into her and moaned softly as she arched against him. He perspired in the cooling breeze as he glided with her, glided into her and out of her, rushed down into her again and again and again until he felt as if he had jumped from an airplane and was falling without a parachute.

Five

The dense woods of peninsular Ontario loomed up on both sides of the two-lane country road. In the twin cones of yellow light from the Rover's headlamps, Dominick Savestio could see the trunks and lower branches of beech, maple, birch, and hemlock.

Where's the pine trees? Savestio asked the driver.

The other man was barely out of his teens, whipcord thin, with great gnarled hands that did not go with the rest of him. He glanced at Savestio, then looked back at the road. Pine trees?

I never been here before, Savestio said. Canadian woods. Always wanted to come. But I thought it was nothin' but pine trees.

The real pine forests are north of here, way up past Barrie and Orillia.

. . . Once you get beyond Braces-bridge, you'll find almost nothing but pines of one sort or another, lots of spruce, tamarack, balsam fir . . . But not down here?'

There's pines here, the driver said. But not the kind of thing you're talking about.

Have to go up there past Bracebridge some day.

It's good country.

They were both silent again.

The heavy-duty, knobbed tires rumbled pleasantly on the weathered road.

Saturday afternoon, driving a rented car, Dominick had crossed into Canada at Niagara Falls. He had used a false set of papers, but there had been no trouble. He'd driven on to Hamilton at the point of Lake Ontario where he turned in the car and stayed the night at a good hotel. After an early Sunday breakfast of Canadian bacon, boiled potatoes soaked in butter, and poached eggs on toast, he checked out and rented another car. From Hamilton he drove northwest toward the shore of Lake Huron. Along the western coast at Kincardine, he registered for the night as Peter Yavich, according to his false papers. He had carefully explained to the desk clerk that he was going to go up to Tiverton to see relatives and, if they were more insistent than he hoped, he might have to spend the night there. Nevertheless, he wanted this room, he said, as a sort of excuse not to have to stay with the kin. They were not all that close. And they owned this damned timber wolf that howled all night. In any case, he wanted the room for two nights. The clerk understood. Dominick had known that he would. He had only been in Canada a little over twenty-four hours, and already he felt that Canadians were the kindest, most polite, and most helpful people he had ever encountered.

At nine o'clock Sunday night, his room phone had rung. Mr. Yavich, is it?

Peter Yavich, yes.

I'm calling for Mr. St. Cyr.

I was expectin' you.

If you'll be out front in half an hour, someone will come around for you.

The quiet kid with the soft voice and the lumberjack's hands had picked him up in the Land-Rover precisely at nine-thirty. For more than two hours now, they'd been heading north on secondary roads, making good time, not saying much. The night got darker, the trees thicker, and the sky higher with every passing minute.

There you are, the driver said, pointing to the right-hand side of the road.

Dominick tensed What is it?

Pines, the kid said. A whole stand of them.

Dominick Savestio leaned in against the dash and craned his neck to look up at the trees. Silhouetted against the stars, huge pines narrowed to feathery points more than a hundred feet overhead. Must look nice in the daylight. Big and green.

You sound like a real outdoorsman, the driver said.

I'd like to be. The pines gave way to hemlocks, and Savestio sat back against the seat. I was raised in Brooklyn. Been there?

No.

You don't ever want to be there either. No pine forests in Brooklyn.

Where you live now?

New Jersey, Dominick said. No better. You fall over people no matter where you go.

Why the interest in trees? the driver asked.

I never thought much about trees and open spaces till I was sent to Nam, Savestio said. Then we'd go on patrol, out in them jungles where it was all green and deep and spooky . . . and by the time I was home again, I had this feelin' for it. I'm tryin' to get up the money to buy a piece of land way out somewhere. Couple of hundred acres where no one else can come. Maybe up in the Rockies. Or in these pine forests of yours, north of this Bracebridge. He stopped and drew a deep breath and let it out in a sigh. For him, that had been a long speech. You must have met St. Cyr in Vietnam, the driver said.

That's right.

You two in the same company?

I don't want to talk about Nam, Savestio said sharply.

Sure.

I been out of there five years now. But I lost a lot.

I understand.

They rode in silence.

Half an hour later the driver made a left turn and came to a full stop before a steel-bar gate set in a high, electrified fence. Two spotlights shone on the gate and on a watchman's cabin just inside. The red-and-white sign on the gate said:

INTERNATIONAL PRODUCT RESEARCH
AND TESTING

Carrying himself like one of the tight-assed MP's Dominick had known in the army, the guard came out of his cabin and strode to the gate. He was wearing a pistol on his right hip. Behind him another guard stood in the open cabin door.

The driver switched off the Rover's headlights.

The guard at the gate studied them for a long moment, then stepped back and called something to the man in the cabin doorway. The other guard disappeared inside, and a second later the halves of the

gate swung open automatically.

Putting the headlights on again, the driver took the Rover between the gate panels which shut immediately behind them.

Very nice, Savestio thought. He was proud of Barry St. Cyr.

They followed a wide, graveled road through the dense woods and finally came out in a clearing that was three hundred yards wide and so long that it vanished into darkness. Drum-based flags marked off a primitive runway. Three buildings clustered at this end of the runway: a corrugated steel hangar that must have been built sometime in the 1930s, a garage with bay doors for eight vehicles, and a clapboard house encircled with a railed veranda. Lights glowed out of most of the windows in the house. The hangar was rusted in spots; several windows in the garage were broken and patched with cardboard; and the house was unpainted. The kid drove across the runway, past the hangar and the garage, and parked in front of the two-story house. Not much, he told Dominick. But it's home.

Surprised to see thick drifts of snow nestled against the raised veranda, Dominick followed the younger man up the steps and into the house. The front hall was narrow, poorly lighted, and hadn't been painted in twenty years. The air was full of stale cooking odors that reminded him of the old house in Brooklyn where he had been raised. They walked a third of the way down the hall and entered St. Cyr's office.

This had once been the living room, and it was now as shabby as the rest of the house. Cracked yellow paper blinds and ancient mildewed brocade drapes covered the windows. The wallpaper hung in shreds. The pegged pine floor was warped, scuffed, and stained. The only furniture was a tattered gray studio couch, half a dozen straight-back chairs, and a schoolteacher's desk that was badly marred with cigarette burns.

St. Cyr was sitting at the desk. He threw down his magazine and jumped up and rushed over and pumped Savestio's hand as if he were trying to tear it loose. How you been, you honky bastard?

Laughing, Dominick said, No new complaints. Embarrassed by the sincerely emotional greeting, but pleased to know that Barry really felt this strongly about him, Savestio grinned too. What about you?

Top of the world, St. Cyr said. He dismissed the driver of the Rover and guided Dominick to the studio couch. He left the room to get a six-pack of beer from the kitchen, and then they settled down to talk. Gonna be a long night, he said. But you mind if we kinda get business out of the way first? Then we can just be friends.

Okay by me, Dominick said.

With Barry business was the buying and selling of stolen weapons and military equipment. He had served four years in Vietnam, where he

had worked hard to make contacts with the American officers and French colonialists who were dealing on the international black markets. Since leaving the army four years ago, he had steadily built a reputation in the illegal arms trade.

He stopped in to see Savestioin Warren, New Jersey once a year and called him on the second Monday or second Tuesday of each month. After dozens of calls Dominick was still routinely amazed at the exotic places from which St. Cyr telephoned: Paris, Rome, Hong Kong, La Paz, Rio de Janeiro, Lima, Caracas, Zanzibar . . . hell, from everywhere!

Evidently the life of an arms smuggler was a romantic one. Dominick enjoyed sharing in it second-hand. He was happy for St. Cyr. You couldn't ask for a better friend, and you wanted your friends to have everything.

Dominick always had a telephone number where he could reach St. Cyr if he were in bad trouble and needed help. Barry had this crazy notion, to Dominick's way of thinking, that he owed Dominick something. He was always trying to pay back for Nam. . . . Twice a year the number changed, but Savestio always had a way to reach St. Cyr in a hurry.

Ten days ago, Dominick had used that number for the first time in four years. A woman had answered. Barry wasn't there. But she took Savestio's name and said she'd forward the message.

Six hours later Barry returned the call. From Mexico City. He was worried that he hadn't gotten back to Dominick in time.

No emergency, Dominick said. It's just I got this chance to be in on a big job. But I need your help, so I thought maybe you'd like to split the action.

What do I contribute? St. Cyr asked.

Sheepishly, Dominick said, A three-passenger chopper.

St. Cyr had not hesitated. When you need it?

Got to use it the last Saturday of May.

No sweat. You got to come to Canada for it. And getting it back there is your problem. But you'll have it.

Don't you want to know the job? Dominick asked.

Can't hear it on the phone. Competitors might be listening. So you might as well wait till you see me in Canada. You'll get a call in a few days telling you how to find me.

This is important, Dominick said. I don't know how I can ever thank you for

Shit! St. Cyr said. Don't need gratitude. Gives me a swelled head. Wait for the call. And he had hung up.

The call had come four days later. He had memorized directions. Friday, he had left Warren. Saturday he crossed into Canada and

drove to Hamilton. And now here he was in this decaying house at an old airfield in the woodlands near Lake Huron. The ease of it still made him a bit dizzy: getting a helicopter just like that!

St. Cyr chugged a lot of cold beer. Okay. What's the job?

I told you about this man Jessup, Dominick said. Jewel heist in Jamaica. You flew for him.

Flew for him two other times. Drove a getaway car twice, worked as an extra gun for him . . .

Released from the hospital six months after being airlifted out of Vietnam, Dominick had used his savings and partial disability pension to get a pilot's license and to learn to fly the helicopters he admired in Vietnam. He applied for and received veterans' benefits, including a business loan. He made a down payment on and financed the rest of a Hughes 500 five-seater. Renting hangar space in a private airfield near Warren, he opened a helicopter charter service. But he soon learned that taxes and licenses fees weren't designed to help the lone operator who was starting from scratch. Worse yet, the bank loan on the chopper had an unfixed interest rate that was adjustable to the fast-climbing rate of inflation. If Pat Jessup hadn't come along, and if Dominick hadn't finally become disgusted with the rewards of honesty, the business would have collapsed. But Jessup had come along, and there was enough money in the illegal work to force the company into the black at last.

This job comes from Jessup again, Dominick told the tall, lanky black man. And my cut could set me up for life.

I'm listening.

Dominick told him about Century Oaks, detail for detail, the whole plan as it now stood.

No one's ever successfully robbed a track, St. Cyr said.

No ones tried it like this, Dominick said.

True enough. The black man opened two more cans of beer.

Dominick shifted uneasily on the sofa. You still in?

St. Cyr blinked in surprise. All I'm doing's renting you a chopper. Don't have to risk a hair. Stand to make twenty-five thousand. You couldn't force me out, you dumb honky!

Twenty-five's not enough! Dominick said. He appreciated St. Cyr's friendship, but he did not want to feel patronized. You're riskin' an expensive military chopper. You could lose it. You got to take Don't tell me what I got to take. I clear thirty thousand a month, so why steal from friends? This place isn't shabby 'cause I'm poor. Hell, I pay the cops a fortune every month! But that don't buy me protection from the Queen and Uncle Sam, so I got to be ready to abandon without loss. I got a villa in France. That's where I live. Money comes from selling guns, grenades, plastic explosives . . . little stuff. I just

made a deal in Mexico City for five hundred M-16's, and I walked away with twenty thousand profit. Point is I don't do any better on big equipment. Expenses are higher. And I don't know enough outlets for the big stuff. I will some day. But not yet.

St. Cyr kept this place in operation, he explained, because he wanted to move into heavy weaponry as soon as possible. This part of Ontario was near Flint, Saginaw, Detroit, and other Michigan cities where military goods were produced. Through contacts with officers at army storage depots, and through ties with black brothers in the factories (black brothers who mistakenly thought St. Cyr was a revolutionary rather than a simple, ordinary profiteer), surplus weapons could be moved, records changed, the theft concealed. And then it was an easy matter to fly, ship, or even truck the goods from Michigan to Ontario. And nobody notices that a couple of hundred rifles have just disappeared? Savestio asked, amazed.

You got to understand the system, St. Cyr said. First of all, they've hardly slowed down production since things got quiet in Southeast Asia. It just rolls out of the factories and piles up in back lots and depots. They're swimming in the junk! Besides . . . haven't you ever wondered how these defense contractors can pour away so much money just developing and manufacturing fifty thousand rifles for the army? It's because they manufacture fifty-five thousand on public funds and sell the extra five thousand on the black market. He grinned at Dominick when the other man seemed shocked. See, Dom, when we were over there in Vietnam we were part of a big money racket. It's just that we were on the wrong end of it.

And this chopper you have for me came from Detroit?

Around there, St. Cyr said. It was on a company back lot waiting to be moved to a depot for deep storage. So the guard on the back lot at night is open to a bribe. And so is one of the inventory men on the day shift. The guy in inventory alters the records to read one less chopper. We come in at night with a truck . . . Easy as picking apples from a tree. Costs me twenty-five thousand for everything, including transportation to the hangar outside. So I get twenty-five from you and then I sell it to another middleman for seventy-five, I'm doing all right.

Isn't it worth more than seventy-five?

Sure. It's a new Kaman Huskie with auxiliary tanks. And the guy I sell it to will get a hundred and a quarter for it, maybe even one-forty.

Well

But that doesn't figure into this deal between us, St. Cyr said. You're renting it for twenty-five, and that's as good a deal for me as it is for you.

Dominick was still worried. He shook his head slowly. His broad face

was scored with worry lines. What if it's lost?

So?

You're out twenty-five thousand.

Peanuts.

No way.

Then you'll be gone too, St. Cyr said. And I'll be a whole lot sorrier about losing my best friend than about losing a month's income.

Staring at the empty beer can, crumpling it between his powerful hands without really noticing what he was doing, Dominick said,

Well, I don't know . . .

Jesus! St. Cyr jumped up and threw his own beer can across the room and stalked angrily to his desk. He turned and glared at Dominick. His head was pulled down between hunched shoulders. His eyes gleamed, and his narrow black face was drawn into a caricature of rage. You listen to me, you motherfucker! What happened to you in Nam should have happened to me! I wake in the middle of the night and I hear that booby trap going upbang! And I scream myself sick. You took that charge instead of me

That was a long time ago.

What the fuck's that got to do with it? I was supposed to be leading that patrol until I lost my nerve. And now you're the one who's messed up for life. Maybe you think that doesn't mean anything to me. Maybe you don't think I got any dignity or self-respect. No sense of responsibility. But I don't care what you think, you stupid honky cocksucker. I'm doing this for me. You can't use your own chopper on this, because if things go sour and the copter crashes and you somehow get away, they'll still be able to trace you through your machine. I got a nice anonymous Kaman Huskie for you, and you're going to take it. You're going to knock over this goddamned racetrack, this Century Oaks. If you get yourself killed, then I don't have to feel indebted to you anymore. I can forget you. And if you get away with it, you'll have the money for those two hundred acres out in the middle of nowhere. That is what you want, isn't it?

Dominick nodded.

So this is for me.

Dominick was all choked up.

To get you off my back, St. Cyr said, his voice softening a little.

Agreed?

Agreed.

St. Cyr came back and opened the last two beers. He handed one of them to Savestio and took a long swallow from his own can. Then he looked hard at Savestio and said, I didn't come down too heavy, did I? No, Dominick said. He smiled weakly and shook his head wonderingly. I just don't think I deserve a friend like you.

St. Cyr sighed. Such a dumb honky.

Six

After twenty years on the backstretch, Edgar Garrison could not have slept late in the morning even if he had been well paid to do it. He was wide-eyed at seven o'clock. At seven-thirty, wrapped in a brown bathrobe and fresh from the shower, he came back into the bedroom. Annie was in the middle of the brass bed, lying on her back with her hands behind her head, her small breasts strained into pert cones. Her auburn hair spilled across the sheets.

Breakfast?

She made eyes at him, eyes like a gazelle, soft and startled. Hmmm. That'd be nice.

Pancakes?

And sausages?

I think I can manage.

I'll get my shower.

In the big country kitchen on the first floor, he prepared their breakfast with skill acquired through years of practice and countless culinary mistakes. He had everything ready for the plates when she came downstairs in a red silk wrap with her damp hair hanging in melted copper strands.

They washed the food down with cantaloup juice which he had made in the blender, and they basked in the warm morning sunlight that streamed through the enormous mullioned window over the sink.

While he poured the coffee she cleared away the dirty dishes. When she sat down again she said, We're pretty good together, aren't we? No useless chatter. We're comfortable with silence.

I guess you had your fill of chatter from customers when you waited tables. And I've heard enough of it from horse owners, track officials, and jockeys' agents Thousands of hours of chatter.

She smiled. I like living with you.

Likewise.

Since she lost her husband, since he lost his wife, each of them had lived alone. Years alone. Neither of them cared for the social scene: parties, bars, dances. . . . Each of them was a loneruntil he found someone with whom he could be close and yet not have to surrender that abiding inner privacy.

It's scary, Garrison thought. You form a relationship you have something to lose. And if I lose again . . .

Sleep well? she asked.

Good enough.

I didn't. Just napped.

Something wrong?

She stirred her coffee.

Annie?

You think anyone'll get killed? she asked, meeting his eyes and holding them.

It's possible. But there's no chance you'll be hurt.

And you?

I'll be all right.

She went to the mullioned window and stared at the rolling green fields. Suppose we get out alive with the money but Willie or Lou gets killed? Or one of the others. We got them into it. Are we ever going to forget. Each time we spend a dollar we'll remember who died for it. He walked over and stood behind her. He put his hands on her slender shoulders. We aren't forcing them to take these risks. It's the kind of thing they've done before. They're freelance criminals, thieves, heist artists . . . If you or I were killed, none of them would waste much time brooding over it.

Willie might.

He's got a bad crush on you, Garrison said. But let's not delude ourselves. Occasionally Willie would remember you'd been killed, and he'd be sad about it. But then he'd go on living. He'd enjoy the hell out of the money.

She sighed. I guess you're right.

I am.

She turned around and hugged him, then let go and leaned back against the edge of the sink. But what about civilians? What if some bystander or track guard gets shot?

It won't happen.

What if?

You're not going to kill anyone, he said. You won't have a gun. And I don't think I could do it even if it meant avoiding capture. If one of the others turns out to be trigger happy . . . well, that's not our responsibility.

Her always-startled blue eyes were even wider than usual. Our morality is more . . . flexible than I thought.

These days, he said, maybe that's a blessing.

At two o'clock that afternoon Willie and Lou arrived with the two men they had met at Harrisburg International Airport over the noon hour. The newcomers were both dressed in suits and ties, as if they were on their way to a legitimate business conference. Because he had worked with both of them before, Willie Denver made all the introductions. The more interesting of the two, Garrison thought, was Pat Jessup. He was a stocky man in his forties, five-ten, a hundred-eighty pounds, with the compact and blocky look of a weight lifter. His face was broad, flat, and dark. He had thick eyebrows and thick lips and extremely narrow eyes. Everything about him was brown: brown hair, well-tanned face and hands, brown eyes, a chocolate colored suit, beige shirt, brown tie, brown shoes. When they shook hands, Garrison saw that Jessup was wearing a heavy ring set with a ruby as large as a child's marble; that was the only bit of brightness, the only spark of

color about the man.

Vince Greenfield, who had flown in from New York City with Jessup, was in his late twenties and looked like a bright young lawyer. He was six-foot, slightly on the slender side, and handsome in a sterile sort of way. His reddish-blond hair was razor-cut. Carrying a black attach case, dressed in a well-tailored subtle blue-gray-plaid spring suit, blue shirt, and gray knit tie, he belonged at the side of an executive at an important conglomerate's board meeting.

With the arrival of these two, the team was together except for the helicopter pilot, Dominick Savestio.

When names had been exchanged and hands shaken, Annie offered drinks. Jessup took a Scotch and water, no ice. Greenfield asked for a Coca-Cola, and everyone else had what he'd drunk the previous afternoon.

Drinks in hand they went into the front room where the glass-enclosed Eskimos stood free of snow, the grandfather clock echoed softly, and their images were reflected in the oval Victorian mirror. For a few minutes everyone clustered around the three chairs that had been brought in from the kitchen and which served as easels. A three-foot-square of poster board was propped on each chair. Each poster bore a floor plan of a particular level of the main building of Century Oaks Race Course, Garrison had drawn these himself, from memory. No body spoke, and one by one they drifted away from the charts and sat down.

Everyone was silent.

They stared at one another, waiting.

No one's in the mood for anything but business, Lou Velinski said at last. Edgar, would you explain the plan?

May I take notes? Vince Greenfield asked.

For an instant Garrison thought he was joking. Then he saw that Greenfield was sitting on the edge of his chair, knees together, a notebook in one hand and a pen in the other. I guess you can.

I'd hate to forget anything, Greenfield said.

Speaking slowly, carefully, trying to remember every detail, Garrison explained how in spite of the incredibly heavy security precautions they would take all the money from the cash room, mutual windows, promotional display room, and VIP restaurant at Century Oaks Willie and Annie already knew it by heart. Velinski had certainly heard most of it from Willie, and the other two would at least have a general idea of it if they'd come this distance to hear the whole thing. But everyone listened intently, rapt, as if hearing it for the first time. When he was finished Edgar said, Questions?

Pat Jessup had finished his Scotch and water. He sat with both feet flat on the floor, both arms on the arms of his chair. He said, They

recently remodeled this Horsemen's Club on the fifth level?

Within the last four months, Garrison said.

Jessup frowned. How do you know there's still an exit from the Club to the roof of the building?

They give tours at the track, Annie said. Started giving them Saturday. I was in the first tour group of the year. I've been in the Horsemen's Club, and I've seen that exit.

Good enough, Jessup said, staring at her openly, admiringly. She was on the couch right beside Garrison, but so far as the brown man was concerned, she might as well have been in a different world altogether. His gaze was hazy, half-focused. He continued to stare at her as he asked Garrison another question. Edgar, how do you know so goddamned much about this security system of theirs?

Garrison explained about the cut-rate deal Pro-Teck had made with Century Oaks in return for a little publicity. It was in the newspapers all the time when the track first opened a few years ago. Big articles in the Racing Form.

That's all that's on my mind, then, Jessup said. Looks to me that if everyone does his job, we can't lose.

He kept staring at Annie.

Garrison wanted to get up and walk over and turn his head around backwards.

Conspicuously, firmly, as a sign to Jessup, Annie took hold of Garrison's hand and squeezed it tightly.

Garrison squeezed back.

Lowering his gaze to their hands, Jessup frowned. Then he turned sideways in his chair and looked at Lou Velinski and said, You're sure you can get one of these key cards for the cash room door?

Velinski's hands were folded on his huge belly. He was smiling. He seemed supremely contented. Pro-Teck's home offices are in New York City. I know a damned good private detective there who doesn't always operate inside the law. He's working on it. He promised me the card on Wednesday.

Ever since Garrison had finished outlining the plan for the heist, Willie Denver had been pacing back and forth in front of the three floor plans, studying them peripatetically. He turned on his heel now and said, Pat, Willie Denver expected you'd be able to get the guns for this job. You still have sources?

Sure, Jessup said. In New York. Queens. But you're talking about one submachine gun and four pistols, all of them clean and absolutely untraceable. Fifteen hundred bucks. Who's financing them or is everyone going to throw in a couple hundred?

I'm financing, Edgar said.

Fine, Jessup said.

But since it's my money I want to go with you when you spend it. That okay?

Jessup shrugged. Suits me. We'll go tomorrow.

Clearing his throat to attract their attention, Vince Greenfield said, I'd like to be more clear in my own mind about this money in the display room. He tapped his notebook. Part of the big publicity for Sweepstakes Week is built around the fact that Century Oaks will be awarding a million in purses throughout the week. So they're going to have one million in cash on display behind the bulletproof glass.

Beginning tonight.

That's right, Garrison said.

Greenfield closed his notebook. You're sure they're going to have a real, full million? Not just cut paper stacked between real bills?

I suppose it could be faked, Garrison said uncomfortably. But they've done a lot of promotion about it. A Harrisburg bank is renting the million to them. The local paper carried a picture of Killigan, the track manager, signing the insurance policy to cover the display. So we just have to proceed as if we know that they're sincere.

Of course, Willie said, none of that display money can be spent. It's all crisp and new. The serial numbers will be recorded. So Willie Denver will have to take it back to New York and fence it. Willie knows a guy in the mob who can spread it around all over the country. He'll pay a person fifty cents on the dollar for hot cash. So it'll bring a half million in spendable bills.

Where do you put the total take? Velinski asked Edgar.

Somewhere around two million, minimum. That's including the half million we'll get for fencing the display money.

Willie clapped his hands gleefully.

Lou Velinski whistled and said, A lot of swag, as if he were quoting a line from a movie.

Greenfield sighed and checked the knot on his gray knit tie.

Jessup said, What's the split?

Seven ways, all equal. Maybe somebody thinks since Annie and I are together she shouldn't get a whole share. But she's taking risks too.

She's done a lot already. So she gets a seventh. Anyone object?

No one objected.

For God's sake, Willie said, why would a person want to argue? This is big! There's enough for everyone!

Leaning forward in his chair, looking as if his huge suspended belly would unbalance him and topple him to the floor, Lou Velinski said, Is there enough Scotch for everyone? For a second round to celebrate the agreement?

When Annie and Willie had gotten new drinks for everyone except Greenfield, who was still nursing his first Cokethe tone of the

conversation was much different from what it had been. Small talk. Weak jokes. A great deal of high humor without direction. Even Greenfield joined in on the laughter, but Jessup sat stone-faced, saying little, never smiling.

I don't believe he can smile, Garrison thought.

Shortly before five o'clock the four men got up to leave.

In the kitchen, Annie turned to Velinski and said, Selznick's *Since You Went Away*, 1944.

Velinski grinned. What about it?

The three women.

Jennifer Jones, Claudette Colbert, and Shirley Temple.

Jennifer Jones's boy friend.

Robert Walker, of course.

They had a grumpy old boarder living upstairs.

Monty Woolley.

Perfect, Annie said.

Velinski kissed her on the cheek. Of course, dear. I am never less than perfect.

The last to leave was Pat Jessup. As the others went down the back steps and across the lawn toward the barn where Willie's Cadillac was parked, Jessup stopped in the middle of the porch and turned around. He jammed his hands in his pockets and looked at Garrison. He stared only at Garrison, although Annie was in the doorway too. His brown face was without expression, bland, Slavic. He said, How close are you and this woman?

Edgar was surprised by the question, and he didn't know what to say.

Very close? Jessup asked insistently.

Yes.

You live together?

What the hell's that got to do with anything? Garrison was angry about this invasion of his privacy. And he was somewhat frightened by the threat he thought he sensed in the other man's questions. Then suddenly . he realized that Jessup's stanceshoulders slumped, hands in his pants pocketswas meant to communicate his lack of aggression. He was not trying to move in on Annie. He just wanted to know how things stood. Yes, Edgar said. We live together.

Happy that way?

Very.

Okay then, he said, turning away.

Wait, Garrison said.

Jesup looked back.

Exactly what were you after?

If you weren't close, if you didn't care, Jessup said, I'd take her. He did not look at Annie. His eyes were as hard and cold as deep glacier ice. I

like the way she looks. But I don't like trouble on the job. Personality problems, woman problems can make the best heist go sour. So you don't have to worry about me. The two of you are close, and that's the end of it for me no matter how good she looks. He took his hands out of his pockets and walked out to the barn.

Christ! Annie said breathlessly.

Garrison still felt disoriented, as if he'd staggered out of a carnival ride and his legs were rubbery. Nasty sonofabitch, isn't he?

I think I just met the King of the Chauvinists. He talked about me like I was a thing! Like I was a piece of goddamned property or something! He put his arm around her and could feel her heart thumping like a rabbit's heart. The warm spring breeze that blew in across the porch seemed suddenly suffocating, enervating.

That's a dangerous man, she said.

I think so.

He wouldn't hesitate to kill an innocent bystander who got in his way.

Let's not start in on that again.

Sorry, she said, as if she meant it.

The Cadillac reversed out of the barn. It turned around on the lawn and disappeared down the driveway toward the front of the house.

Willie tooted the horn twice.

Edgar Garrison watched the Cadillac. And when it was gone he studied the spring landscape. But on the screen behind his eyes, he saw something else altogether: shattering glass, dead men lying on granite steps, and money spotted with blood. . . .

Seven

At three o'clock Monday afternoon Ely Grimes let himself into his room at the Lazy Time Motel two miles west of Century Oaks Race Course. Measuring twelve-by-ten, with a tiny attached bath just big enough to turn around in, the room was little more than a cell. The double bed had a sagging mattress, squeaking springs, and a clean but tattered yellow chenille spread. The foam padding on the seat of the Danish-style armchair was broken and lumpy. The walnut veneer dresser was cigarette scarred; but, like everything else, it was well polished and clean.

In thirty years on the road as a salesman for several women's clothing manufacturers, Ely Grimes had stayed in hundreds of better rooms. For the next six days, however, he wanted something cheap, for he intended to conserve every dollar he could for wagering at Century Oaks.

He unpacked his suitcases and put everything in the dresser drawers. As usual Clara had folded his clothes precisely and neatly. She had even wadded tissue paper in the folds of his shirts and slacks to keep them from wrinkling.

The thought of her carefully packing the big suitcase and worrying that his trousers might come out creased gave Ely a sharp twinge of guilt. In his briefcase he carried five thousand dollars which had come from a new mortgage on their small house in Tenaflly. They had paid off the house just eighteen months ago, largely because Clara kept a part-time job and because, over the years, she had managed to salvage some of his pay before he went to waste it at the tracks or in private poker games. He had obtained his latest mortgage by forging her signature. And in his wallet was another three thousand in hundred-dollar bills, the last of their joint savings account. She didn't know that he had withdrawn it. Indeed, she probably had never heard of Century Oaks. She thought that he was working the Pennsylvania route, selling, on the road and lonely . . .

As quickly as the guilty feeling came, it passed. After all, this was a different situation in which he now found himself. It was not like the other times he'd sneaked off to gamble. Now, he was driven not by the gambling urge so much as by necessity, panic, fear, desperation. This was his last chance to give Clara something more than just his love and affection which she already had in healthy measure to repay her for thirty-two years of patience, tenderness, and love. A year from now he would be dead. He wanted her to have certain options once he was gone, enough financial independence to pick and choose between futures. He could never earn enough, in the brief time left him, to insure that freedom for her. Therefore, he was going to have to win it. He hung his jacket and travel bag in the tiny closet. In the bathroom he washed his hands and face.

This time, he thought, I've got it all together. I've done my homework. I've figured it from every angle. I know the winners this time or I will as soon as the entries in each race are posted. Six winning days. Or, more accurately, five winning nights and one winning day, since Century Oaks has day racing only on weekends and holidays. But winning. Yes, That's what it'll be. I'm nobody's fool this time.

When he came out of the bathroom, he dragged the armchair to the side of the bed, so that the bed served as his desk. He opened his second suitcase and arranged the contents on the yellow chenille spread: pencils, pens, eight looseleaf binders each containing two hundred pages of closely typed data, another binder full of graphs, a tenth binder containing time and weather charts, an electronic mini-calculator that could fit in his pocket, two worn slide rules, three steno pads, a magnifying glass, and three plastic boxes that contained twelve hundred file cards. He picked up the copy of the Daily Racing Form he had bought in Harrisburg an hour ago, opened it to the Century Oaks pages. He placed it beside the magnifying glass. Smiling, he sat down to work.

After a series of especially bad losses at the track a year ago, Clara had come down hard on him. Ashamed of himself, somewhat frightened at having thrown away three thousand dollars in one week, he had slacked off. For twelve months now he'd done little more than place ten bucks a week with a bookie and buy lottery tickets. Nevertheless, he maintained his complex files on nearly three thousand thoroughbred race horses and a maze of bloodlines. Although he had not gone to the track in all that time, he had bought the Racing Form every day and studied it closely. He placed his bets in his mind and each day calculated what he would have won or lost if he had been working with real money.

During the last four months he had been winning consistently. His losses were always minor. Almost every day brought an imaginary profit: a hundred one day, fifty the next, a thousand the day after that. . . . Ely Grimes had finally found a system that worked. Of course, it was all on paper so far. But he was about to change that.

Five winning nights, one winning day . . .

Cancer? The word echoed in the high-ceilinged room, You're sure about this, Jim?

Ely, I've been your doctor for twenty years and your friend for nearly as long. When the first results came back from the labs, I didn't want to believe them. That's why I put you through the tests a second time. But it has to be faced.

Leukemia.

A rare type

That can't be cured. How long do I have?

A year at the outside.

Better than I thought.

We can keep you ambulatory and outwardly healthy for nine months. Free of pain too. After that . . . luck!

I'm fresh out of luck.

As insane as it sounds, Ely, you can't let yourself be pessimistic about it. You've got time left. Every minute's precious now. Don't waste it. I guess you're right.

Don't try to live it up, exactly. Don't take trips to Europe or kill yourself nightclubbing. Try to enjoy the little things that you rush past most of your life. Enjoy each other, Ely.

He nodded.

When will you tell Clara!

Do I have to tell her before . . . it becomes obvious?

It's always better to face something like this together. You should give her time to adjust emotionally. And there are any number of practical considerations. . . . Like getting your finances in shape, preparing for an easy transference of the estate.

Can I wait a couple of months? Three months? So we can have some fun together without the damned cancer being on her mind all the time? Three months?

I suppose you could squeeze that in.

You won't tell her?

Not unless and until you want me to.

Maybe in three months I can make up for some things. . . .

Five winning nights . . .

One winning day . . .

Then he could go back to Tenaflly, New Jersey, with a bundle of cash. He would not say a word to Clara about his winnings. He'd just plow the money into eight percent savings certificates and tax-free bonds. And when he died all of it would be waiting for her, growing for her: a better future than she could possibly expect after thirty-two years with a schmuck like him.

He wished he could be there to see her face.

He stared at the first page of the Century Oaks listings in the Racing Form. The opening race of the night was one mile, for maidens three years old and up, claiming price of two thousand dollars. A maiden was a horse that had never won a race. And the low claiming price for which any registered owner at the track could buy any horse in the race simply by stating his intention and posting collateral was so low that the owners of these nags obviously didn't expect any of them to win.

Sighing with disgust, shaking his head, Ely turned the page. How in the name of God could anyone select from a field of cheap maidens? It was strictly for amateurs in the first race, as was usually the case in the first half of the daily double.

The card for the second race was much better. This one was six furlongs (three-quarters of a mile), for three-year-olds and up, either sex. This was an allowance race; no horses could be claimed from this one at any price, Which made sense, because they were all fairly good animals.

He picked up his magnifying glass and studied the past performances of each entry in the second race. He looked each horse up in his looseleaf binders and delved even deeper into its past. He consulted the weather and time charts. He went to the door of the room and opened it and looked at the blue spring sky, sniffed the air. Then he returned to his chair and examined the past performances once more. The slide rules slid. The calculator gave him bright orange numbers in a rectangular read-out window. With great care, Ely Grimes began to apply the system which he had developed over the last twelve months of inactivity.

Eight

After less than five hours of sleep, Jack Killigan woke at nine o'clock Monday morning. He got out of bed and went into the bathroom. Stupefied by his hangover, he took two Anacins and stood under a hot shower for fifteen minutes, letting the scalding droplets pound the ache out of the back of his neck. His bowels were loose. His teeth were scummy. The sound of the electric razor was as bad as a power saw held next to his ear. Just getting ready for the day ahead was an ordeal nearly beyond his endurance. He dressed for work in a gray suit, pale herringbone shirt, black tie, and black Italian shoes.

Lying on her side on the bed, facing him, Rita Janifer slept through all of this. She was breathing slowly, heavily. Her black hair hid half her face. Her mouth was slightly open, and a silver thread of saliva glistened on her chin. The covers came only to her waist. Partly shielded by one raised arm, her heavy breasts invited him; one large dark nipple poked stiffly over a wrinkle in the sheets. Rita never got out of bed until eleven o'clock and often not until noon. And if he woke her now there would be hell to pay.

Downstairs he made fresh coffee and drank two cupfuls laced with anisette. He was not yet ready for food. If he'd had no way to perceive the world except through his stomach, he would have thought that he was aboard a ship at sea.

At 10:15 he telephoned Molly Barnes, his secretary.

I walked in the door fifteen minutes ago, she said, and Mickey Ginchey was already on the phone. He says there'll be two hundred and fifty tons on the manure pile by tonight, and if we don't get rid of it soon the weight's going to tilt the whole track to the south. Molly was a stout, grandmotherly woman in her middle fifties, and she had a hearty, booming laugh.

Killigan explained about the list of fertilizer, farming, and trucking companies that was on the top of his desk. Start calling the ones I couldn't reach yesterday, he told her. See if any of them have the right kind of trucks to help us and if any of them do, be sure to make them quote a price.

If I draw nothing but blanks?

We'll worry about that when I get there.

Right, she said. When will you get here?

No later than eleven-thirty.

After he hung up he went back to the kitchen and drank two more cups of coffee with a shot of anisette in each. Then he tried a few bites of toast. His stomach rolled and heaved. He decided that lunchtime was soon enough to test his digestion, and he threw the rest of the toast in the garbage.

Before he left he went to the bottom of the stairs where he listened for movement on the second floor. All was quiet up there. Rita was still

asleep.

He got to his office shortly before eleven-thirty. Molly was just cradling the telephone when he came through the door. As usual, the first thing she reported to him was the forecast she had gotten by phone from the weather bureau at ten-thirty: clear skies tonight, no precipitation, temperatures in the fifties. Then she went on to the bad news. As she had feared and as he expected, no one but Agroco had the equipment or the desire to haul away such enormous quantities of manure-matted straw.

What next? she asked.

He thought a moment. He wished he didn't feel so dizzy and sick to his stomach. Get me this Simpson at Agroco. At least he ought to have some idea how long the negotiations are going to take before the strike ends.

However, what Simpson had to tell him did nothing but further sour Killigan's mood. Agroco employed four hundred people, eighty of whom were truck drivers and deliverymen. Only these eighty were out on strike. They wanted a steep salary increase and were threatening to hold out for unionization of the entire company. Agroco had offered half the wage increase demanded and would go not one dime further. The company was giving the drivers until Wednesday morning, day after tomorrow, to report back to work. Then if the strike continued all eighty would be fired and a new crew hired.

Frankly, Simpson said, I don't expect them to come back on Wednesday. There's a hothead union organizer among them, and he's got them too fired up for their own good.

If they don't come back on Wednesday, Killigan said, how long until you can start picking up here again?

Hiring eighty new drivers, training them, acquainting them with their routes . . . that's going to take time. I guess we'd start making regular stops at Century Oaks in two weeks.

That's impossible! Killigan said. I'll have fifteen hundred tons of muckings by then! He pounded one fist on the desk as he spoke, completely unaware of it. I want action now, Mr. Simpson. I've got to have it!

I sympathize with your situation, Simpson said. Can't be too pleasant out there. But there is a strike clause in the contract we have with you. As long as these drivers are out, or as long as it takes us to train replacements, we're not liable.

I know, Killigan said wearily. Look, maybe I'll get back to you later today.

Nothing's going to improve that fast.

Just the same, I'll be back. He hung up.

When Molly Barnes went to lunch at twelve-thirty, Killigan had not

come up with any solution. He sat at his piano-size desk and doodled on a sheet of paper as he tried to find a hole in what seemed to be an unpenetrable wall of thorns.

He still felt miserable. He had a slight headache; he was sick to his stomach, bland, drawn out. Finally he poured himself some bourbon over ice and sucked it cautiously. By the time he had finished it, he felt almost normal.

But the Agroco problem remained.

If the goddamned board of directors had listened to him back in January, there would be no problem now. He had tried to persuade them to purchase a high-intensity incinerator that would burn the muckings without producing much ash, smoke or odor. But the furnace would have cost at least a million dollars, and the board had been unable to see any farther than the price tag. He'd argued that they were already paying Agroco a million every eight years at the current transportation costs. And he'd tried to explain that, since approved landfills in the area were at a premium, many of the small communities within a ten-mile radius of Century Oaks might well pay the racetrack for the privilege of burning their garbage here. These fees would pay for a substantial part of the purchase and then, eventually, would cover all of the operating expenses. But the board members responded with even more cowl-like stupidity than they'd shown every other time he'd talked money to them. They wanted to cut corners, run a cheap operation, and make a modest profit. But that wasn't the nature of thoroughbred racing. You either went into it with big money in a big way, looking for big profits, or you forgot it altogether.

And now that the crisis had come they would be enraged at Killigan if it weren't solved sooner than immediately. He would take all the blame. No one would say, You told us but we wouldn't listen. It wasn't fair.

He felt himself surrendering to despair, and he thought: Jesus jump to hell, Killigan! Stop your despicable whining! Do something! If you're unable to deal with horse-shit, how do you suppose you'll handle more important problems?

His downhill slide always began this way. He had failed to cope with an operational problem. It got out of hand. Related problems arose. Bit by bit the whole thing fell down around him, and he was given the pink slip.

But not this time.

He had finished a second drink and had come up with a plan by the time Molly Barnes returned from lunch at one-thirty. Get me Simpson, he told her.

She smoothed the wrinkles out of her green knit suit and straightened

her blouse over a huge, motherly bosom. Ah, she said, you've solved it.

Maybe.

When Simpson came on the line he said, I'm sorry, Mr. Killigan, but nothing's changed. He sounded perturbed with Killigan for having called back so soon.

We're going to change it, Killigan said confidently.

Simpson didn't know what he meant.

How many drivers have you got, exactly?

Exactly eighty. Why?

What sort of salary do they want?

Simpson hesitated. That's really a private matter between Agroco and the striking drivers.

Sighing impatiently Killigan said, I'm not asking the size of their pay checks. I just want to know the raise they're asking.

Well . . . twenty bucks. Across the board.

Per week?

Yes.

You said earlier that Agroco's willing to meet half of that.

We think ten dollars a week is generous, Simpson said.

Then I've solved your problem and mine. Century Oaks will put up the other half of the twenty bucks. For a period of one year.

Hesitantly Simpson said, I don't believe I heard you right.

You'll make a contract with your drivers. We'll add an attachment to our contract with you. We'll pay an additional \$41,600 that's ten dollars a week for fifty-two weeks for each of your eighty drivers over the next twelve months. We'll call it an adjustment in transportation costs, but we'll actually be subsidizing the pay increase you'll be giving your men.

Simpson said suspiciously, You're serious?

Entirely.

Give me a minute.

Take your time. He listened to Simpson breathing heavily and scribbling furiously on a notepad.

There's a problem though, Simpson said at last.

What's that?

If we give in and meet this ridiculous salary demand, then other Agroco employees will want equal raises. Before you know it, the payroll's going to skyrocket.

Let's play no games, Killigan said. You know that if you were willing to raise salaries by ten dollars, these poor bastards must deserve the whole twenty or more. Simpson tried to speak, but Killigan talked over him. If you've got union agitators, you're in trouble. The only way you can defeat them is to do the unexpected, meet the men's

demands in full. That makes you the good guy and the unionizer becomes a carping know-nothing. And of course you're going to have to raise salaries throughout the company. Otherwise the union man will just infiltrate another facet of Agroco and start sowing dissension there. What I'm offering you is \$41,600. No more. No less. I can't solve all your problems.

You don't mince words, do you?

I haven't meant to make you angry.

Another long silence followed. Finally: On this attachment we'd make to the contract between us . . . would you include a clause that binds you for the next year too?

One year, Killigan said firmly. No more and no less.

But since Agroco's the only company with trucks that can suck up and transport the muckings, we could just raise the price on you next year. By \$41,600 or even more.

You could, Killigan admitted. But you won't, you bastard. Because next year I'll have that incinerator, My authority limits me to a one-year deal, Mr. Simpson. You either take the \$41,600, or we will all sit tight and try to ride out this strike.

When would you want the trucks there?

Tomorrow morning, Killigan said, knowing he'd won.

That's not going to be easy.

But it can be done. You draw up a one-page attachment and send it to our lawyer, Jeff Cassarian, in Harrisburg. Don't mail it. Give it to a messenger and get it out within the next hour. If our lawyer doesn't find anything wrong with it, he can send it to me. I'll sign it this afternoon. A copy of it can be back in your hands before six o'clock. Along with a check.

For one-twelfth of the full amount.

Sounds fine.

And the trucks tomorrow morning.

Tomorrow afternoon at the latest, Simpson said.

My track superintendent will have a gold carpet laid out for them, believe me,

Nice doing business, Simpson said.

As always, Killigan said. He put the phone down and leaned back in his chair and sighed with relief.

Killigan spent the rest of the afternoon on the telephone trying to gain the board of directors' approval for his deal with Agroco. There were ten men who had substantial money in Century Oaks, and he called each of them. Initially, in almost every case, there was some resistance to the solution he had found. But he was forceful and diplomatic, and in the end he got the go-ahead from all of them. Five of them even congratulated him for his resourcefulness.

When he told Molly Barnes about these compliments, she said, Will wonders never cease!

They ceased a long time ago, he said. Maybe now they're starting to flow again.

Molly left work at five, an hour early. She had agreed to drive to Agroco's offices in Hershey and deliver a copy of the signed attachment with a check for \$3,467 to Paul Simpson. When she had gone, Killigan was alone on the fifth floor except for Roy Aspin, the track's publicity director, who had come to work at four o'clock and would stay until the end of the last race tonight. Aspin was pounding away at his typewriter as accompaniment to Molly's fading footsteps. Killigan went back into his office and closed the door. At the bookshelf bar he poured his third bourbon of the day.

Just three. Not bad. You're getting on top of it.

He went to the small closet where he kept a few clean shirts, socks, ties, underwear, and three suits. He chose a beige summer knit and a pale yellow shirt, carried them into the bathroom that was attached to his office, and hung them on the back of the door. He put his drink on the commode tank. He undressed.

Nude he stood before the full-length mirror and studied himself. Floating on the Agroco success he looked upon himself with some pleasure. He was in damned good shape for a fifty-year-old man. His hair was gray but had been for the last fifteen years gray, thick, and lustrous. His eyes were clear and searingly blue. Not an ounce of fat on his slender, wiry body. Excellent muscle tone. Flat stomach. None of that sag of biceps, chest, and abdomen which he saw in other men his age. Well-muscled legs. In a nest of dark pubic hair: his penis, thick and somewhat distended. Not enormous. But certainly adequate. Rita had never complained.

The pale snake rose to a soundless rush of unmade music.

Laughing, Killigan turned on the shower, made it as hot as he could bear, and stepped in as steam rose to the ceiling of the cubicle.

Invigorated by the drumming water, proud of his stubborn erection, he thought about Rita and hoped she would be waiting for him again tonight. He dismissed the misgivings he'd felt the night before. Rita was flighty, unpredictable, and maybe even a bit crazy. But she was no threat. Last night he'd been worried, full of doubts about himself. But the doubts had been burnt from him by the conclusion of the Agroco deal. Now, he wanted Rita. Badly.

He stepped from the sweltering shower, finished his icy bourbon in one swallow, and shuddered pleasantly.

At six-fifteen he knotted his tie, straightened his collar, tugged at the lapels of his suit jacket, and looked at himself in the mirror one last time. Then he went on a tour of the main building.

What he saw pleased him. Already, three hundred people were dining in the Oakview Room, the mammoth glass-walled clubhouse restaurant on the third and fourth levels. The fourth-floor concourse between the betting windows and the top of the multitiered restaurant held another five or six hundred, mostly men working with tout sheets and racing papers. Fifty people were in the Saddle Bar which with the men's and women's restrooms that flanked it separated the two long rows of mutual windows on this level. The clubhouse had a festive air about it. The mobs of incoming guests on the escalators chattered and laughed. Dozens of pretty women in spring dresses brightened up the place to say nothing of the leggy, bosomy, Pony Express Girls who were selling racing programs until it was time for them to move up to the Horsemen's Club on the fifth level. This period of sweet anticipation, the tour before post time for the first race, was always the best time of the night.

It's like foreplay is to sex, Killigan thought.

Although the guests on the grandstand concourse seemed a bit more tense than those in the clubhouse, tout sheets and past performances were studied with tightly set lips and grim determination; the atmosphere was still pleasant, electric. The ratio of men to women was higher here than in the clubhouse, while the ratio of dress clothes to sports clothes was substantially lower. The Harry M. Stevens concessions stands were doing a brisk business despite prices that were far more elegant than the food. On all the concrete pillars there were posters reminding the guests of the thousand-dollar drawing to be held between the eighth and ninth races every night this week. In the few minutes he took to stroll the length of the grandstand concourse, Killigan was greeted by a dozen racing fans, people he had never seen before in his life. Smiling, shaking hands when he had to, he answered each of them.

Century Oaks had twelve thousand grandstand seats; and if the size of this early crowd was any indication of what was to come, they might fill most of them by post time. In any case it was going to be a better than average night.

Fifteen minutes after the results were posted in the fourth race, a cashier on the clubhouse level signaled for the assistance of a TRPB agent. The tiny red Christmas bulb winked on above the last cashier's window on the extreme west end of the concourse.

Henry Cooper, the agent in charge of the investigation into the recent ticket forgeries, was only forty feet away. He was sitting on a divan near the railing that separated the concourse from the clubhouse restaurant. Although he appeared to be watching the odds as they changed on the television monitors suspended from the concourse ceiling, Cooper was actually studying the winners who were turning in

tickets at the cashiers' windows. He saw the red light the moment it came on, and he went over there to learn what was wrong.

Only one guest was at the window. He was two inches shorter and fifty pounds lighter than Cooper. He had a round, pale face and very ordinary features. His suit was a bit disheveled. With his long-fingered hands he gripped the sill of the mutuel window as if he were struggling to keep from sinking to the floor.

What's the trouble? Cooper asked the pretty blond cashier.

She pushed a mutuel ticket under the window grate. When Cooper picked it up she said, It's been altered.

It looked normal. Cooper said, How can you tell?

Feel it.

He rubbed his fingertips lightly across the face of the ticket and sensed a change in surface texture around the number of the horse. Maybe you're right. You're damned observant, aren't you?

She blushed slightly and shrugged. This is a ten-dollar window. I'm not worked as hard as the cashiers at the two-and five-dollar payoffs. For the first time since he'd come in answer to the red light, Cooper directly faced the nervous man standing beside him. This is your ticket.

Yes. That is . . . Not mine. No. I mean . . .

Someone gave it to you, Cooper prodded. Asked you to cash it for him because he was a track employee who couldn't make his own bet or collect on them.

That's right. The stranger blinked in confusion.

Forgery artists usually used women, preferably older women who seemed motherly and helpful. But this meek specimen was a natural. Where is he? Cooper asked.

Like I told the young lady, he was standing over there by the television screens. But he's gone. I know that sounds ridiculous. You probably think I'm lying. But

I believe you, Cooper said. It's the usual procedure.

The stranger was perspiring, and he still gripped the sill of the mutuel window as if it were all that was holding him erect. My name's Hudson. Arthur Hudson. I'm a respectable man. He didn't sound as if he were trying to convince Cooper; instead, he seemed to be struggling to convince himself. I've never been so embarrassed . . . His watery brown eyes looked ready to spring forth with tears like a prankster's novelty flowers squirting jets of water.

Don't worry about it, Mr. Hudson, Cooper said. You were used. You're not the first.

It's still humiliating.

Cooper led him to one of the divans near the closed-circuit television monitors. They sat down side by side. Cooper took a notebook and

pen from his inside coat pocket. I just need a little information, Mr. Hudson. Then you can get back to the races.

I'm afraid this spoils the evening, Hudson said.

Don't let it. Enjoy yourself. This could have happened to anyone.

You're not to blame in any way.

Hudson looked doubtful. His lips quivered.

Description? Cooper asked.

He was a tall man, Hudson said. In his thirties, I should think. Dark complexioned. Well dressed. He wasn't as imprecise as the woman who had been used as a front the day before.

Color of hair?

Blond.

You're sure?

Quite sure.

Eyes?

Blue.

Any distinguishing features?

Well . . . he had what you might call a Roman nose.

Large, very straight nose?

That's it.

Anything else? Any scars?

No, sir.

Mustache? Beard?

Clean shaven.

Long hair or short?

Full but not long, Hudson said. An expensive haircut.

Sideburns?

Hudson didn't even hesitate. They weren't unusually long, if that's what you mean. He might be meek and easily used. But at least Hudson was aware of the world around him, sharp on details.

You said he was well dressed.

Yes.

Did you notice the color of his suit?

Dark. Blue or black.

Shirt?

Blue or white. Light blue, I think.

Patterned?

Plain.

His tie?

Striped.

Cooper continued to ask questions, an inquisitive worm boring relentlessly through an apple of information. He was good at interrogating a witness, and he knew it. He was a natural for police work. It was the only thing he had ever wanted to do. As he probed at

Arthur Hudson's memories, he was exhilarated, very much alive and happy.

All through high school Cooper had wanted to be an FBI agent. When he'd graduated from junior college, he made application for Bureau training and was accepted. He worked hard and achieved his commission as a field agent. But he was soon disillusioned. He found that the FBI spent more time chasing after political hobgoblins than in the pursuit of real criminals. The days of gang-busting were long gone. The Mafia operated almost as openly as legitimate businesses. The Bureau spent its time harassing peace activists, Communists, liberal politicians, and countless other political groups whose threat to the foundations of democracy seldom if ever equaled that which was posed by the underworld families that ruled the illegal drug traffic, gambling, and prostitution within the United States. When he finally realized that the Bureau thought of the Mafia as a safe American institution, just another facet of the power establishment, and not as an opponent, he had quit his job in disgust. He had heard about the Thoroughbred Racing Protective Bureau, and that seemed to him more along the lines of the work he had originally sought when he joined the FBI.

A racetrack usually employed fifty to seventy-five uniformed guards hired from a private agency like Melkins-Peterson. These men served as public relations personnel as well as guards and were posted where they could be seen and could answer questions. The average racing fan probably thought that these were the only police on the track. But that wasn't the case. The TRPB was everywhere.

In 1946, the Thoroughbred Racing Associationan organization of the first class flat racing tracks in the United Statesestablished a detective unit and assigned it the job of cleaning up the sport and keeping it clean. Racing was, back then, as corrupt and dishonest as the paranoid fans suspected. Since 1946, however, the Thoroughbred Racing Protective Bureau had made it extremely difficult if not impossible for elements of organized crime to operate within the sport. Spencer J. Drayton, an ex-FBI agent, had established the TRPB according to the structure of the FBI when the FBI had been a gangbusting, first-rate police force. Today the TRPB is the most efficient and modern private police agency in the world. It has eliminated nearly all forms of race fixing. It inaugurated the lip tattoo method of identifying horses and thus made it quite impossible for anyone to run a ringer"substitute an equestrian impostorin a race. The TRPB maintained files and fingerprints on three hundred thousand racing personnel and successfully excluded criminals from the sport of kings through the liberal application of modern identification methods.

A permanent TRPB unit was assigned to every member track. Dozens

of TRPB plainclothesmen disguised as stable hands, maintenance men, or dressed in suits and ties like Cooper patrolled the grounds from the clubhouse and grandstand to the paddock and stables. Not even the track manager knew precisely how many TRPB men were on his track at any time, and he knew only a fraction of them by name or by sight. However, no matter how many agents there were, each of them was kept busy. More money moved through the world of thoroughbred racing than in any other American sport. And where there was so much loose cash there were certain to be men who would do anything to cut themselves in on a piece of the action. Since he'd joined the TRPB four years ago, Henry Cooper had encountered damned few dull moments.

Was there anything else about this man that might help us identify him? Cooper asked. Have I forgotten anything?

You've been quite thorough, Hudson said.

Cooper nodded. He knew that was true. Okay. We're almost finished. If you'll show me some identification and answer a few questions about yourself, you can get back to the races.

Fear rose again in the pale, round face. Hudson began to fidget. He glanced shamefacedly at the other fans on the concourse as if everyone were staring at him and talking about him when, in reality, no one was paying him or Cooper the slightest attention. I thought I wasn't a suspect.

You aren't, Cooper said. But you are a witness. If we catch the man or men behind this forgery racket, we might need your testimony.

Hudson's face brightened a little. Yes, of course. I didn't think of that. He opened his wallet and gave Cooper a driver's license and a Master Charge card that bore his photograph.

Cooper copied down Hudson's Baltimore address, then passed back the license and credit card. Occupation, Mr. Hudson?

Schoolteacher. Or I was. I'm retired now.

You look young to have retired.

Forty-seven, Hudson said. He fidgeted again. Well, I have a steady income from the family investments.

Are you here alone?

No. Uh . . . I'm with my . . . my . . . girl friend. We've come up for the whole week. So I guess I'll be seeing you around.

What hotel are you staying at?

Hudson told him.

I'll give you a call if we need you, Cooper said. And now I hope you won't let this spoil your evening.

When Hudson had gone, Cooper studied his notes. The description was damned good. It ought to help.

Once he had a picture of the wanted man planted firmly in his mind,

Cooper closed the notebook and got up and spent the rest of the evening walking from one end of the clubhouse to the other. He saw several men who resembled Hudson's contact, but none of them fit the description entirely, and none of them was wearing a dark suit, blue shirt, and striped tie. By the end of the last race, Cooper was somewhat frustrated. But he wasn't depressed. He knew that his man would make a mistake eventually. In his four years with the TRPB, Cooper had never failed to uncover and apprehend any forger, race fixer, or tipster whom he'd set out to destroy. It wasn't gangbusting, but it was enough of a challenge to keep him interested.

When Jack Killigan arrived home at twelve-thirty Tuesday morning, he was in fairly good spirits. The night had been free of major crises. The attendance figure was an all-time record for an average weekday night: more than four thousand in the clubhouse, eighty-five hundred in the grandstand. The handle was nearly two million, and the net profit for the day was substantial. The advertising, special promotions, and the backbreaking work of the last several months was going to pay off.

In the second-floor master bedroom Rita was waiting for him, and that should have made the day perfect and complete. She was watching the Tonight show on which she had often been a guest during her Hollywood days. She was nude, sitting up in bed, on top of the sheets, her slim ankles crossed, one hand in her lap and one hand curled around a glass of whiskey. In the dim wash of bluish light from the television screen, she was an erotic fantasy.

As he undressed, Killigan told her about the crowd at Century Oaks and the size of the handle, worked backwards to the deal he had made with Agroco. He was pleased with himself, and he did not try to hide it. But she responded with one- and two-word acknowledgments and then only when he prodded her for some reaction. She didn't look at him but stared intently at the television set as if some great revelation were about to unfold there.

Peeling off his briefs and rolling, naked, onto the bed with her, he said, This must be some fascinating program.

The usual.

Well, then we've better things to do.

I'm not in the mood, she said.

We'll see.

I'm not.

He cupped her breasts and gently rubbed his face between them. He licked, nibbled, sucked, and kissed her nipples until they grew turgid against his lips. When he slid one hand over her flat belly, he found her thighs were pressed together, denying him. He tried to part them. She would not relax.

You're an imbecile, she said. Her voice was low, sing-song, and yet fierce. It mesmerized him. You're away all day. You don't bother to call. I hang around waiting. Phone doesn't ring once. Finally it's post time, and I know you're not going to call that late. So I'm pissed. And I start to drink. All I want to do now's drink and wait until you come home so I can tell you what a piece of shit you are. I watch a lot of television. I get stoned silly. And when I get stoned silly, I get sentimental. Stupid. Blubbery. So when you finally waltz in and don't even apologize and want to just stick it into me like I was some kind of masturbation machine hell, by then I'm too blubbery to be able to tell you you're a sonofabitch. Tears were rolling down her cheeks. Killigan was stunned. He had never seen her cry. She was always such a tough lady, downright mean at times. But never tender. Never vulnerable. This was something altogether new. How could he ever have anticipated this? You aren't the kind to wait around for phone calls, he said defensively. And I was busy, Rita. It was a hectic day. Go to hell.

I didn't mean to hurt you.

I'm fine, she said, still watching television. I just want to watch this show and then get some sleep. I'm too stinking drunk to drive home. He gripped her shoulders and tried to make her look at him. I apologize.

Wonderful. But that doesn't get you very far now. It doesn't get you fucked.

I don't want to make love anymore.

Not love, no. You want to fuck. Tonight you'll have to make me. That's the only way you'll get it.

I wouldn't force you.

You'd have to rape me. For the first time all evening she turned away from the television set and looked at him. Her ripe lips were parted slightly. Her eyes were dark, smoky, and filled with invitation.

What's happening here? Killigan wondered. What is she trying to take from me. And why?

He dropped his hands from her shoulders, cupped her breasts once more. He could feel her heart pounding. If you don't want me, why are you sitting here naked?

She glared at him.

He pried the whiskey glass from her hand and threw it on the floor. Answer me.

Go to hell.

He dragged her down until she was flat on the bed, ignored her sharp nails as she scratched at his shoulders and arms and hands. When he tried to force open her tan thighs, she slashed at his face and drew blood from his left cheek.

Damn!

She squirmed across the bed.

He grabbed her and pulled her back. When she kicked, he jammed a knee between her suddenly opened thighs.

Bastard! she said.

Both hands beneath her buttocks, he lifted her toward him as she writhed and twisted and sought to escape. When his penis made slippery, quivering contact with her damp mound, he saw what might have been genuine hatred pass across her lovely face. He hesitated, unsure of the meaning of the game, wondering if he had violated the rules . . .

She took advantage of his confusion and brought one knee up into his testicles hard enough to make him cry out and let go of her. As he leaned back on his knees, grabbing at himself, she wriggled out from beneath him and scrambled toward the edge of the bed, danced nimbly across the room.

Despite the pain that coursed through him, he went after her. At the bedroom door he caught her. He lifted her from the floor and carried her back to the bed. She was kicking and screaming. He threw her down and pushed her face into the sheets. He clutched her buttocks and separated them and slid a thumb through her cleft as if opening an envelope, and thrust into her before she could escape again.

With each possessive stroke he made, she screamed and tossed her head and bucked against him. At first he thought she was really fighting him. That was what she wanted him to think. And yet she managed to use her slick inner muscles with the expertise of a whore. When he realized that, instead of the slow love-making that he had anticipated all day, she was going to finish him in seconds, he quickly withdrew from her. His rigid organ slid up between the halves of her full bottom. But it was too late: he spouted a fleur-de-lis of glistening semen in the small of her back.

The instant that she felt the fluid scalding down her flanks, Rita took advantage of his climactic weakness and pulled away from him. She rolled off the bed and ran into the bathroom, slammed and locked the door. In that hollow, tiled echo chamber she cried and cried, until her sobbing ceased to be human and sounded like the forlorn wails of sea birds kiting on a storm wind.

She wanted to be raped, he told himself.

Did she really? Then what was she crying about?

He didn't know. He just didn't know about her anymore what she wanted, what on earth she expected, or what she would eventually do with him.

For several minutes Killigan lay exhausted on the bed. His testicles still ached a bit. But the pain that most affected him was not physical.

He felt cheap, soiled, and worthless. He was ashamed of himself. When he closed his eyes his mind became a cornucopia spewing forth the rotten fruit of the past: images of his mother scolding him, his mother drawn and sick and dying, pale-faced priests seen through confessional wire, sharp-faced priests mumbling mysteriously over his mother's gray corpse, stern nuns drifting silently across convent lawns, nuns raising black wings to the wind, the accusatory expression on the suffering face of the crucifix in the church where he had been a choirboy. . . . He was surprised by all of this, for he had not been to church in thirty years. He no longer believed; he was an atheist. Yet here it was again, without warning, the whole damned traveling show of guilt and oppressive fear. . . .

Christ, what a mess!

The day had seemed to be chugging right along, making good time, going in the right direction . . . and then without warning it had been derailed. It now lay in a shambles.

He got up and found Rita's whiskey glass where he had thrown it. He filled the glass with ice and bourbon from the fixings that stood on the floor at her side of the bed. He sucked the bourbon down as if it were water.

Easy. Remember how you felt this morning.

He couldn't afford a hangover every day.

What the hell, he said to the host of the Tomorrow program, who was smiling at him from the television set. How the hell else am I going to sleep? Right?

He poured another bourbon. While he waited for Rita to come out of the bathroom, he worked hard at getting drunk.

Nine

When he got back to his room at the Lazy Time Motel shortly after midnight, Ely Grimes went straight to the Danish-style armchair beside the bed. He sat down, struggled out of his suit coat, loosened his tie, and rolled up his sleeves. He opened a well-marked copy of the Daily Racing Form which he had used to dope out tonight's races at Century Oaks, and he carefully studied the same group of past performances over which he had agonized the previous afternoon. Aided by the magnifying glass, he pored through his notebooks, charts, graphs, and file cards. He was quite meticulous about it, as if this were the first time he was doping this particular card, as if he would have some real money on it. Actually, he had already put real money on it. He had already lost. And now he was determined to discover why.

He was startled to find that the winner of the second race, Ring the Bell, should have been his original choice. Instead, he had bet on a nag named Insouciant. But if he had religiously applied his systemthe

system born of a year's inactivity he would have ruled out Insouciant without a second thought.

For Christ's sake, Grimes! he thought, disgusted with himself.

Insouciant! The damned horse won its last race in a driving finish against a quality field, and so you thought, considering the average competition this time, that it made, a good bet. Other factors pointed that way. The horse had stamina. Guts. Driving finish! Sure, but look at the jockey on it last time. Joey Misakonis! Misakonis is in love with the Garrison finish: hold back all the way, trail the field, then thunder in to win in the stretch. That's Misakonis all right. But this time the jockey was Billy Fiore. Billy pushes his mounts right from the damned starting gate. He likes to get a commanding lead and keep it. Fiore and Misakonis: two dumb, predictable jocks, totally different from each other. Grimes, don't you know anything? Don't you know the rules of your own system? It should have been Ring the Bell. Ring the Bell all the way. You should have put two hundred on this goddamned Ring the Bell. Insouciant! Jesus! Next you'll want to bet on one of the track horses!

He had placed losing bets in five of the night's nine races, winning bets in none of them. And now he saw that he could have won every time if he had been a bit more careful. The system worked! It was just his sloppy application of it that needed improvement. He had spent a year handicapping from an armchair, twelve months of nothing but make-believe bets. He hadn't wagered real money for so long that he had forgotten how to take this sport seriously. But that would change. From now on he would check, recheck, and triple-check his every selection.

All the way back to the motel, Ely had been depressed and confused. He'd lost eight hundred at the mutuel windows, more than he had ever dropped during a single season. He'd had trouble keeping his mind on his driving and had run off onto the gravel shoulder more than once, swerving dangerously to the guard rails. Behind his eyes the nags raced in endless circles. His stomach galloped with the horses, spun and lunged and lurched through each replay of disaster. But now he felt much better. He had proved the system was not at fault. This debacle was attributable solely to human error. If he triple-checked he'd be okay tomorrow and all the way through Saturday. He'd broken from the gate worse than he'd hoped to do, but he'd be in the winner's circle nonetheless.

He cleared the paraphernalia from his bed, undressed, propped himself up with pillows, and picked up the rumpled Racing Form. For the first time since he'd purchased the paper, he disregarded the tables of data, the past performances, and read the news on the front pages. When he saw that the owners of Magic Pitcher intended to race the

two-year-old in Saturday's Sweepstakes, Ely's spirits rose even higher. Magic Pitcher was the latest wizard from a champion bloodline that Ely had charted and followed for years. If there had been any horse since Secretariat with a chance at immortality, it was Magic Pitcher. Most sports writers had failed to grasp this even though Magic Pitcher had racked up several impressive wins. Maybe none of them had really taken a close look at the bloodline or at the two-year-old's incredibly good form. Whatever the case, Magic Pitcher was going to win the Sweepstakes barring the last-minute entry of a more experienced horse of the same class, combined with a muddy track on which Magic Pitcher would not be able to give his best performance and he was certain to go off at something like four-to-one. Good odds. Hell, they were fantastic odds when you knew absolutely that you could not lose! Reading the racing news, rereading and rereading the short article on Magic Pitcher, dreaming of his infallible system that was sure to in however small a way defeat terminal cancer and give Clara a fine and happy future, Ely Grimes fell asleep sitting up in his bed at the Lazy Time Motel.

* * *

Two miles away, on the backstretch at Century Oaks Race Course, Danny Eugene Foxen looked up and down the dark stable row. Six dim electric lights, hooded by facsimiles of antique iron lanterns, did little more than soften the shadows under the promenade roof that overhung the stable. No one was moving about at this hour, except for a few TRPB agents. But none of those bastards was nearby. Even the goats, chickens, ducks, cats, and other pets were asleep. Leaning in the open top half of a stall door, Foxen called to the horse inside. The animal snorted and smacked its lips but did not show itself. Foxen called again, softly. A moment later Magic Pitcher thrust his beautiful chestnut head out of the stall door and snuffled loudly at the intruder.

Hi, there, boy, Foxen said.

The horse regarded him with enormous, bright, suspicious eyes.

Foxen held out a sugar cube.

Magic Pitcher snatched it up and crunched it apart in an instant, tilted his head as if asking for more. He was, Foxen thought, a damned nice-looking two-year-old. His owners had paid a quarter of a million for him at the Keeneland Summer Sale in Kentucky, the most expensive and important auction of yearlings in the world. He had not gone for a record price, nowhere near it, but he had obviously been a good buy. Not the best colt of the sale, not the best two-year-old of his class, he was nevertheless a money-maker.

Glancing up and down the stable row again, finding that it was still deserted, Foxen fished two more sugar cubes from a pocket in his

jeans and gave them to the horse. While the two-year-old chewed ecstatically, Foxen took a box of kitchen matches from his shirt pocket. He struck a match along the side of the box and waved the flame in front of the horse.

Magic Pitcher reacted immediately, although he had far too much pride to panic. He tossed his magnificent head and rolled his dark eyes. He snorted and whinnied softly, as a refined gentleman might exclaim at the begging approach of a filthy wino. He just could not believe that this man was harassing him in such a fashion. Baring his teeth he drew back into the stall.

Giggling uncontrollably, his face bright with sweat, Danny Foxen threw down the spent match and struck a second one. He drew figures in the air with the flame, like a child brandishing a Fourth of July sparkler.

Trying to back farther into his stall and finding himself at the end of it, Magic Pitcher blew air and whinnied louder than before. He stamped his hooves. The night was suddenly redolent with the odor of manure.

Foxen laughed.

A parrot, Magic Pitcher's pet, which had been asleep in a cage suspended from the promenade ceiling, woke and began to spit at Foxen. It flapped its wings and danced nervously on its perch.

Danny lit a third match. This time he held the flame in the stall and waved it back and forth.

Finally, Magic Pitcher panicked. He threw his head back and gave out with that curious, high-pitched scream of the terrorized thoroughbred. He kicked at the back of the stall. And since there was another horse beyond the rear partition, the clamor doubled at once. The parrot screeched. In seconds the horses on both sides of Magic Pitcher had joined in the uproar; the peace of the back-stretch, deep and soothing at three o'clock in the morning, was shattered.

Trembling with excitement, Foxen whirled around and ran up the stable row. He turned the corner into the service lane that flanked all of the barns, and he kept moving. He raced past twenty barns before he turned down another row and recrossed the backstretch. He could still hear the fracas in the neighborhood of Magic Pitcher's stall, and now human voices had been added to it. Unable to suppress the giggles that rose in him like bubbles in champagne, he returned to his kitchenette room in the inexpensive backstretch motel where he locked the door and was safe from discovery.

He sat down on the narrow bed and drew his knees up to his chin and hugged his legs.

He said, Oh, boy! Oh, brother!

He got up and paced.

He took the box of kitchen matches from his shirt pocket and stared at it.

He giggled.

He went to the kitchen end of the tiny room and switched on the nearest burner of the gas stove and placed his hands above the blue flame like a man warming himself at a hearth. Perspiration streamed down his ruddy face. The tremors passing through him like vibrations through a tuning fork frightened him, and he wanted to stop them. But he could not quell the strange emotional mixture of joy, fear, and desperation that boiled within him.

For five years, ever since he had turned eighteen, Danny Foxen had worked on the backstretches at Liberty Bell, Bowie, Delaware Park, Hagerstown, Century Oaks, and several other tracks. He had begun as a pony boy, leading the high-strung horses to the gate for a fee of ten dollars per horse. After that he had been a hot walker, cooling them down after each race. He had quickly worked up to a groom's station with a top-of-the-line trainer, where he was today.

Considering all the complicated procedures and essential chores that had to be performed by talented backstretch personnel in order to keep a thoroughbred ready for the track, the groom was nearly as important to the horse's success as was the trainer. As a groom, Foxen had to water, brush, clean, bathe, and bed down his charges. He had the unpleasant task of mucking out their stalls and the comparatively pleasant duty of bridling and saddling them before they raced. If a horse became especially attached to him, he could soothe it better and quicker than its trainer or its pet could do, and that horse looked to him for reassurance when it was nervous as well as for comfort when it was ill.

Danny Foxen had that special natural gift, that indefinable talent, that separated the great grooms from those who were merely average or good. His horses maintained a somewhat higher level of health than those cared for by other men. Because he rubbed a horse the same way every day, week after week, he came to know its body better than he knew his own. If a horse flinched during a rubdown, at a moment when it had never flinched before, Danny Foxen knew that there was something wrong—a pulled ligament, wrenched muscle, sprain, strain, boil, splinter, something—and could discover exactly what it was almost as quickly as the vet could.

But he would never make it as a trainer. If he worked on the backstretch for the next twenty years, he would always be a groom. A trainer had to have but one obsession above all else: horses. And that was only Danny's second obsession. With him the first and foremost thing was fire.

Danny Foxen was a pyromaniac. When he was fifteen he had started a

fire in an abandoned house. The blaze had given him a sense of completion, a soaring knowledge of power, that he had never known before. When he was sixteen he had kindled ruinous fires in another empty house, in an occupied apartment building, and in two parked automobiles. Over the last seven years he had set an additional twenty-one fires, glorying in each of them like a miser gazing rapturously upon his gold. From one blaze to the next his mania remained un-diminished, nor had the thrill of destruction worn thin with repetition.

More than any other fire, that which raged out of control through the backstretch of a racetrack was what most excited Danny Foxen. In the dream which he had enjoyed at least a thousand nights, the same holocaust had titillated him: the dark roofs of the barns peaking in perfect geometric simplicity; the still and quiet slumber of the horses; and then the trace of gray smoke spiraling into the night sky and bringing with it the scent of dry wood burning, a scent like exotic spices; the first demonic, scarlet flames licking along the barn gable, flames that were like the tongues of supernatural monsters; the piercing screams of the trapped horses; hooves slammed mercilessly booma-booma-booma against stable walls; men shouting and screaming and even weeping; mounds of straw bursting into white light; shadows projected in carnival mirror proportions, shadows that danced and leaped and writhed, dervish shadows full of unearthly meaning and terrifying symbol, Halloween shadows. . . . Groaning like a man in the throes of orgasm, Danny Foxen took his hands from the warmth above the gas flame. He switched off the burner and went to his bed and stretched out on his back. He closed his eyes and thought of fire. Gradually, he grew silent, and the tremors faded from him.

Fire . . .

Of all the fires he had started, only two of them had been on racetracks. He was like a weak-willed fat man on a diet that permitted only one piece of candy a week; he preferred to suffer without any candy at all for months and months, save each weekly treat, then gorge himself in one deliciously sweet hour. The TRPB was too resourceful for anyone to escape it after he had set dozens of backstretch fires. He could remain free to pursue his obsession only if he carefully rationed these ultimate thrills.

He thought of the first two racetrack fires, one in Jersey and one in New York. Five years ago: two barns burned to the ground, two other barns damaged, twelve horses dead, four men hospitalized with burns and smoke inhalation. Two years ago: six barns gutted, twenty horses killed, three men hospitalized. . . .

Fire . . .

Fire was the money by which Danny Foxen lived. The fires he set consumed the valuables of other men, and somehow that value then became his own. It really did. He'd thought it all out carefully. Wasn't that the basic nature of all commerce: that one man should make his fortune by acquiring the profits of another? The creation of fires was Danny's work just as the negotiations of loans and interest rates was the work of a banker. The blazes themselves were his financial empires. Fire brought him enduring, although necessarily private, status. He had done a great deal of reading about money and about mental illness, a lot of thinking. He had decided that a mental illness was not necessarily an illness at all merely a difference of opinion between one man and the rest of society. Whenever he wondered about his sanity, on those rare occasions when he doubted the validity of his vocation, he could easily quiet his own fears. He simply reminded himself that he was like all men: chasing after riches. The only difference was that fire was the only coin he desired; flames were the currency of his inner world.

This coming Friday night, on the eve of Sweepstakes Day, he was going to be an incredibly wealthy man. He was going to build a backstretch fire that would be more destructive than his first two racetrack fires combined.

Ten

Tuesday morning Edgar Garrison and Pat Jessup drove into New York City to buy the guns. Edgar took the rented Chevrolet from Harrisburg to Easton, and Jessup got behind the wheel for the last half of the trip, the whole distance broken only by one filling station stop and a break for cheeseburgers and French fries at a drive-in. It was a silent four-hour journey. By the time Jessup parked on a side street in Queens at one o'clock that afternoon, neither man had said more than a hundred words to the other.

Jessup pointed through the windshield at a row of buildings across the street.

Beyond littered pavement, parked cars, and several scrawny beeches planted in holes in the sidewalk over there, Garrison saw half a dozen connected, shabby, three-story buildings. The top two floors of each building were given over to apartments, while businesses occupied the lowest levels. There was a dry-cleaning shop, a used-bookstore, a barbershop, a corner cafe, a shoe-repairman's niche, and a head shop with windows crammed full of gear for teen-agers. Which one?

The bookstore, Jessup said.

We just walk in?

Best way to get there. He got out of the car and started across the street, and Garrison followed him.

Jessup was wearing a new suit, but it was no more colorful than the

one he had worn on Monday. Yesterday's suit had been a deep chocolate brown; today's suit was beige. Yesterday's shirt had been beige; today's shirt was chocolate brown. Yesterday's tie had been dark brown; today's tie was a creamy tan shade. So far as his clothes were concerned, the Tuesday Jessup might have been a photographic negative of the Monday Jessup. The ruby ring was still the only bright element about him.

But he doesn't look as alien here as he did in the country, Garrison thought. All these shades of brown . . . it's almost like camouflage here in Queens, on these ugly streets. He's a city creature, complete with protective coloration.

The used-bookstore's old glass door was divided into eight panes by thin mahogany struts. A hand-lettered yellow sign was painted over four of the panes, broken up into four meaningless pairs of letters by the struts:

PU LP

SH OP

A chain of brass bells dangled from the ceiling just inside, and they chimed loudly when Jessup opened the door.

Twelve-foot-high bookshelves lined the big, unpartitioned showroom that comprised the store. The bookshelves were crammed to overflowing with old pulp magazines—mysteries, science fiction, suspense, romance, westerns, fantasy—and the more recent paperback books which had been published over the last thirty years. Except for the narrow aisles, the floor space was taken up by sixty or seventy long dining hall tables on which were stacked countless thousands of paperbacks and magazines. The books were arranged so that only their spines were showing, while the magazines—which were older, rarer, and more valuable, dating from the 1920s through the 1940s—were placed so that their glaring, lurid rainbow covers could be seen and admired. Garrison read some of the titles on the nearest table: Captain Future, Weird Tales, Thrilling Detective, Ace Sports Stories, Western Trails. . . . The slightly sulfurous smell of decaying pulp paper hung in the room like a Southern Belle's perfume drifting above a porch swing on a suffocatingly hot August night.

A man in a wheelchair rolled down one of the aisles and stopped in front of them. He was in his middle fifties, white-haired, white bearded, with eyes the color of grayed-out printer's ink smeared on an age-yellowed page. His arms were muscular, hairy, powerful; but his legs were completely wasted, nothing but bones and tendons lying at sharp angles under his trousers.

He said, Hello, Pat. Who's your friend? His voice was melodic. He could probably sing well.

His name's Edgar, Jessup said.

Glad to meet you, Edgar, the cripple said. My name's Bill McGill. He smiled.

They shook hands. Garrison expected a bone-crushing grip, overcompensation for the useless legs. But McGill was confident of the great strength in his corded arms. He didn't have to make a show of it. His handshake was gentle.

You're in luck, McGill said. No customers. I'll lock up, and we can get right down to business. He attended to the door. Then, wheeling the electrically powered chair a full hundred-eighty degrees, he depressed a control switch with his right hand and streaked past Garrison toward a freight elevator at the back of the store. The pages of the old magazines rustled in the breeze he made going by them. Come on! The rear half of the enormous basement was no different from the store overhead. Tens of thousands of old books and magazines overflowed from bookshelves and cardboard cartons.

It must have taken a long time to collect all this, Garrison said as he followed McGill toward the front of the basement.

All my life.

Do you really make any money dealing in them?

McGill stopped in front of a bookcase and ran his fingers over the spines of a set of Galaxy. About ten thousand a year. I could make a lot more if I could bring myself to sell the better stuff. You know, I have seven complete sets of Black Mask, three in mint condition. Five sets of Weird Tales. And they're worth thousands. But I can't give them up. These books and magazines . . . They've been my life. I've been crippled since I was six. He turned abruptly from the magazines and continued toward the front of the basement.

The cellar was divided into two rooms, and the second room at the front of the building was where McGill kept his guns. Two hundred rifles, shotguns, and handguns were displayed in velvet-lined cases, on wooden lifts, and on wall racks. Another three hundred guns filled cardboard boxes along one wall; these were mostly revolvers and automatics that needed cleaning and repair work. The room also contained a small, gas-fired forge, cooling pots in which metal could be melted and shaped, a drill press, a lathe, a metal-cutting band saw, and cabinets full of tools. The legs of all the machines and the vise benches had been trimmed to bring the work surfaces down to where a paraplegic could use them in comfort.

Facing them in his wheelchair, his back to the forge, his hands on the arms of his chair and his fingers poised above the controls as if he were ready to take flight, McGill smiled at Jessup and said, What do you need?

Four handguns.

That's all?

That's to start.

Revolvers?

They'll have to be carried in waistbands.

Automatics then. Less of a bulge.

What have you got?

McGill wheeled over to one of the workbenches, and they followed him. He indicated the first four pistols in a row of eighteen or twenty.

I can give you a matched set.

They look like Brownings.

You got it. Browning M-35 high-power semiautomatics. Good manufacturer: FN, Belgium, you know. They're old guns, from the war, but I've taken a lot of care rebuilding them. The only drawbacks are its 9-mm Luger caliber and the lack of a double-action trigger.

Good enough for us.

If you say so.

It'll hit hard enough.

Like a sledgehammer, McGill agreed.

Edgar stood to one side, feeling awkward and out of place, looking from one man to the other as if he were a comic imitating a spectator at a tennis match. He knew something about guns; he certainly knew how to use one. But he was no great marksman and no expert on firearms.

What's the magazine hold? Jessup asked. Ten?

Thirteen.

That's more important than the double-action. What about accuracy?

McGill picked up one of the pistols. As good as any damned Browning made and better than some. No detachable, loose muzzle bushing like you have on most standard .45's and .38 Supers. Forward end of the frame has extra grooves to reduce play. Trigger action's simple. He gave the gun to Jessup.

Jessup studied it lovingly. His hard eyes softened, and a smile played across his thick lips. Nice. He passed it to Edgar.

Only one other thing, McGill said. You've got to watch that exposed hammer. It'll bite your hand on the recoil if you aren't used to it.

Practice should solve the problem.

Garrison examined the gun with far less affection than Jessup had shown. It was heavier than he had expected, two pounds or more. The barrel was slightly under five inches. The richly cross-hatched rubber grip was marred by only one screw. It was all flat planes, clean lines, with absolutely no decoration. It was quite obviously a military gun and not a sportsman's piece. Reluctantly, Garrison began to face the fact that, as Annie feared, it was highly likely that some innocent bystander would be hurt. The Browning was a cold, wicked-looking weapon, as deadly as they came.

He gave it back to McGill.

Serial numbers clean?

There are no serial numbers, McGill said. I took care of that when I rebuilt them. Not even the acid method will bring anything to the surface. The barrels have all been rebores for accuracy, so no bullet is going to bear the same marks it would have carried if you'd used these guns before I got to them. No one's going to connect these pieces with any job but the one you're going to pull. Rest easy, Pat.

We'll take them, Jessup said.

Ammunition?

Two clips for each gun, both clips full. And maybe a hundred rounds for target practice. Hand-packed.

That's all I sell.

How much?

McGill thought about it for a moment. He scratched his beard. With ammunition . . . and considering all the work I've done on them . . .

Two and a half each.

Two hundred.

McGill grimaced. I don't give them away.

You bought them for maybe twenty-five bucks apiece, Jessup said sourly.

I got a lot of sweat in them.

We could knock you out of that wheelchair and just walk off with them. Wouldn't have to pay you a dime.

Wait a minute, Pat, Garrison said, shocked. We have the money. I have the money.

Shut up, Jessup said.

Smiling, McGill said, Sure, you could throw me over. I'm just a helpless cripple. But you'd never get any more guns from me. And wouldn't it be foolish to lose the best source you have? Remember, you're not just buying guns. You're buying safe guns.

Two hundred, Jessup said.

McGill shrugged. Two and a quarter.

You're a real thief, McGill.

Look who's talking.

That would be nine hundred for the four of them? Jessup asked. .

In cash.

It's a deal.

Garrison opened his wallet. He realized that the purchase of these illegal guns was a criminal act. He could go to jail for this alone. But if he hesitated now, there would be no robbery at Century Oaks, no money, no future but one of hard work and self-denial. He counted out nine hundred dollars and gave it to the crippled man. His hands were shaking. The cripple's hands were rock steady.

Something else? McGill asked as if he were any ordinary department-store salesman.

Jessup said, This is the kind of job where we need to scare the crap out of people to make them cooperate. Nothing scares people better than a submachine gun. A big one. Ugly.

Oh, sure! McGill said, warming to the idea, patting the shirt pocket where he had tucked the nine hundred dollars. I have what you need. Because the cripple reacted so blithely, so matter-of-factly, Garrison said, Jesus! I don't believe this! Is there anything you don't have?

Yeah, McGill said. I'm one issue short of a complete set of Doc Savage and three issues short of a mint set of Dime Mystery Magazine. It bugs the hell out of me.

Shortly before two o'clock Wednesday morning, Barry St. Cyr's men rolled the stolen helicopter out of the hangar and parked it in the middle of the runway. The craft was a Kaman Huskie, the United States Air Force's standard crash rescue and general liaison chopper. The gray and orange-red Air Force paint job had been covered over by a bright yellow master coat with black markings. The copter rested on four hydraulically cushioned wheels, the front wheels smaller and set for lighter stresses than the rear wheels. The nose of it, a Plexiglas bubble, gleamed with moonlight and with the light that streamed from the windows of the house; and although it was a smooth, one-piece, curved plane, the Plexiglas now resembled a giant, multifaceted eyeball. The fuselage was boxy, topped with a Lycoming T53 shaft-turbine power plant and a pyramidal machinery housing. At the apex of the pyramid rested the four intermeshing, angled rotors. At the very tail an array of huge stabilizers looked like posterior wings on a moth. Indeed, perched in the center of the runway with nothing near to it, the helicopter looked quite like a gigantic insect in a specimen tray. On the side of the rescue bay doors there was a sign, black on yellow, that said:

Roto-Transport

General Cargo

Perishables Handled

Mineola, New York

When Savestio had climbed into the pilot's seat and St. Cyr settled into the copilot's bucket beside him, Dominick said, Is there really a Roto-Transport?

Not in Mineola or anywhere else, Barry said. My invention. Kind of sounds real, doesn't it?

Sure does.

St. Cyr took a long swallow from the can of Budweiser he had brought with him. In the last few days Dominick had learned that Barry was rarely without a can of beer. He consumed the stuff like some men

chain-smoked cigarettes. He had not been such a heavy drinker in the army, in Nam. This single, newly acquired habit was the only evidence of the fierce tension under which he operated in this high-pressure world of weapons dealing. Despite the really incredible number of beers he drank each day, he was never drunk; constantly pacing, jabbering, gesturing nervously, he burned off the alcohol as fast as he absorbed it. Okay, let's run through the whole fucking thing one more time, just to be safe.

Dominick sighed and shook his head. Barry, I know what to do. Really. I swear.

Sure, sure. But let's go through it one more time anyway. Never can be too careful. Okay . . . When you lift off from here, you go southeast to Scranton.

Good boy. Give me your flight plan. Course. All the landmarks you should be able to see. Everything.

Dominick rattled it off.

Remember, St. Cyr said, with the auxiliary tanks you've got a max range of five hundred miles.

More than enough.

But only if you keep your air speed down between one hundred and one-ten. Faster than that, you're going to gobble fuel like a street juicer sucking down Thunder-bird wine. At an average hundred-five you ought to reach the airfield at Scranton by sunrise, four hours from now. You'll be expected and you can trust the man there. After Scranton . . . well, then you're on your own, honky.

What happens to Peter Yavich? That was the name on the set of false identification papers which Barry had mailed to Dominick a week ago and which Dominick had used when he'd crossed into Canada on Saturday.

What could happen to him? He never existed. He'll just fade away.

Going, going, gone . . .

The border records. What about those? They take names and addresses.

Sure. But there are only two reasons why the border authorities would ever check to see if Yavich recrossed the boundary back into the States. One: if the cops asked them. But the cops don't even know about the Yavich papers. They never will know. And Peter Yavich isn't wanted for any crime. So why should they ask? Two: Yavich's family might ask about him if he was gone longer than he intended to be. But Yavich doesn't exist. He has no family. No one to ask after him. We've sealed it up tight, Dom. He drank some beer.

Shaking his head with unconcealed admiration, Savestio said, You sure are somethin'. You sure are.

St. Cyr grinned. Ain't that the truth? He braced the can of beer

between his knees, unzipped his vinyl jacket, and brought out a fat manila envelope which he passed to Dominick.

What's this?

Something could go wrong. You might get away but one of the others gets nailed. And he rats on you to save himself. And the cops come after you. . . . So I've got together another set of papers for you: passport, driver's license from Ohio, Social Security card, birth certificate, BankAmericard, Master Charge, other things. But don't use the credit cards. You couldn't pass them. They're included mainly to make the rest of the stuff look authentic. This time you're Charles Amory Haney, a high school physical education instructor from Cleveland. You look the part with those shoulders and biceps of yours. Haney is unmarried. Thirty years old. Before you use it, read everything in the envelope.

All these forged papers must be costin' you, Savestio said. He slipped the envelope into the message pouch in the lining of the copter door. Not much.

Couple thousand.

So you pay me back when you've knocked over Century Oaks. St. Cyr raised the beer can and drained the last of the Budweiser. Got to get a fresh can, he said. And you've got to move. He held out his hand. Luck.

You too.

I was born with it, baby.

St. Cyr slid out of the helicopter and slammed the copilot's door. He ran across the dark runway to the rusting hangar, turned, and waved. Savestio covered his ears with the thick mufflers of the radio headset not to receive or send any messages, but to protect his ears from the cataclysmic thunder of the engine and rotors. He put on the panel lights and studied the flight controls with which he had familiarized himself yesterday afternoon. He worked the choke and punched the starter. Overhead the turbine coughed and whined, roared to life. Keeping one foot jammed down on the brake bar, Dominick switched on the rotors and gradually fed power to them until he had brought them up to full cycle. The chopper shuddered, strained to the left, and tried to rise. He removed his foot from the brake and took the Kaman Huskie up into the moon-filled Canadian night.

He circled once over the buildings.

Barry St. Cyr was still down there, waving.

You'll get it back, Dominick thought. I swear to God you will. And more than twenty-five thousand. A whole lot more. Even if I got to cram it down your throat.

He headed the Kaman Huskie southeast.

The moon lay behind him now. The landscape was pale, ghostly, as if dusted with ashes. The forest was like a million fingers reaching up for him. He maintained a flight altitude only thirty feet higher than the trees. Every time the trees fell away and he found himself over open land, he dropped down to eighty feet. He couldn't risk showing up on radar and drawing the attention of an air traffic controller who would want to know his identity and destination.

Holding his air speed at slightly better than a hundred miles an hour, Dominick homed on commercial radio signals that emanated from the southeast, toward Scranton. His first beacon was a station in Hamilton, Ontario. Then Buffalo, New York. Binghamton. And at last he locked into a classical music FM station broadcasting out of Scranton, Pennsylvania. He encountered no other aircraft. He was not picked up on radar, and he did not stray from his course. At a quarter past six Wednesday morning he located Bishop's air field five miles from Scranton. The trip had been uneventful.

Bishop's was a modest airstrip that could not handle anything larger than a twin-engine prop plane. It boasted five long hangars and a one-story office building that were all in good repair. The roof of the office bore the field's name in huge white letters.

In front of the hangar farthest from the office, a flat oak landing platform supported by twelve small tires was hitched to a tractor. The tractor was facing into the hangar.

They were expecting him just as Barry had said.

Dominick put the Kaman Huskie down neatly in the center of the oak rectangle. He cut the rotors and switched off the turbine, freed himself from the headset.

Even before the rotors had fully stopped, a man in a dark plaid raincoat came out of the hangar. He swung onto the tractor seat and towed the helicopter inside.

Dominick unbuckled his safety harness. When the platform was parked he got out of the Huskie.

The inside of the hangar was dimly lighted. Aside from some leftover construction materials, the helicopter and the tractor seemed to be the only things in the big building.

The man in the raincoat had a hawk nose, black eyes, and hair the color of a bullet casing. He stuttered. One th-th-thing I want t-t-to make c-clear straight off, I d-don't want t-t-to know what you're mixed up in.

Good enough, Dominick said.

I've got a motel room for you.

I'll get my suitcases from the chopper.

Outside, the stranger paused to shut the hangar doors. This b-b-barn's not in use. None of my men will c-c-come here.

They went up to the main office and got into a late-model Buick. The stuttering man drove away from the airfield.

The chopper needs to be fueled, Dominick said.

R-R-Right. F-Fueled. Maintenance?

Better give it the standard once-over.

When you need it?

Saturday mornin'. Early.

It'll b-b-b-be ready.

Three miles away from the airfield, the stuttering man drove into a motel parking lot and stopped in front of Room Forty-four. He handed the key to Dominick. J-J-Just call if you need anything. St. Cyr's a f-friend.

Is there anywhere I can rent a car?

F-Front d-d-desk. Motel has c-cars.

Dominick nodded and started to get out of the Buick.

You want a woman?

He looked back.

The stranger was grinning.

What? Dominick asked.

Woman. You want f-f-f-fucked?

No, thanks.

I'll arrange it. She's p-pretty.

Forget it, Dominick said sharply.

D-Didn't mean to offend. Just a f-favor for a f-f-friend of St. Cyr's.

Dominick took his two suitcases into the motel room.

He undressed, took a long hot bath, and tried to sleep. He had been up all night, and he was weary. But he couldn't stop thinking about the stranger's offer. A woman. A pretty woman. You want f-f-f-fucked? He began to fantasize about her, the way she might have looked: long hair, blue eyes, enormous breasts, legs that went on forever. . . .

Before he could get caught up by the fantasy, he took a paperback novel from his suitcase and sat down to read himself to sleep. You want f-f-f-fucked? F-F-F-Fucked? He finally had to take one of his sleeping capsules. Half an hour later as he drifted into a dream, he wondered what that pretty girl would have said when she saw that he had lost his testicles and most of his penis to a booby trap in Vietnam. He wept softly in his sleep.

Eleven

When he had finally decided to let Willie Denver contact some friends and get this caper moving, Edgar Garrison had been afraid that the days leading up to the robbery would be torturous. He was sure that Sweepstakes Week would crawl past, that time would imitate cold molasses. With each minute passing like an hour, he would certainly lose his energy and courage.

Yet that was not what had happened. Instead, the week was rushing past: a speeded-up film, a 45-rpm phonograph record played at 78 rpm. It dizzied him. It frightened him. If they had not already flashed beyond the point of no return, then they were rapidly approaching it. The trip into Queens, the buying of the guns, and the return trip had made a hectic Tuesday.

Wednesday, Lou Velinski had returned from New York City minus two thousand dollars of his own money but plus a plastic key card that would open the cash room door at Century Oaks. He had paid two grand to a private detective for it. The detective had slipped one thousand to a computer expert who worked for Pro-Teck, and the card had come through within twenty-four hours. Wednesday afternoon and evening the entire team, with the exception of Savestio, got together to run through the plans once more and to practice with the Browning pistols in a grove of maples far back on Annie's farm.

Thursday morning Dominick Savestio had driven to Harrisburg. Garrison and Annie took him out to the clearing in the woods where he would have to land and lift off in the helicopter on Saturday. Savestio examined the birch-framed observation point on the crown of the ridge, and he used Edgar's Zeiss binoculars which he kept to find the window at which Annie would stand to give the go-ahead signal. While Annie timed him Savestio ran down the ridge to the center of the clearing. He was eleven seconds slower than Edgar had been, but he was not breathing very hard when he finished. He was a broad-shouldered, barrel-chested man with more stamina and strength than he would need to complete his end of the job.

When Savestio left for Scranton at four o'clock that afternoon, Edgar went out to the maple grove to have a second practice session with the Browning. Of the hundred spare rounds McGill had sold them, about fifteen bullets remained. He intended to use all of them on a man-form paper target he had drawn himself.

I thought you couldn't use the gun, Annie said. I thought you couldn't shoot anyone.

I probably can't. But if I can, then I want to be able to do it well.

He killed the paper man three times, wounded him five times, and missed him altogether seven times.

If he were real and had a gun, Edgar thought, then I'd be dead seven times.

Later he and Annie ate Delmonico steaks, baked potatoes, and huge green salads with hard rolls. He had a tremendous appetite. The condemned man eating well?

Starting in the shower and progressing to the bedroom, they made love. It was more intense for him than he had ever known it could be, and he thought she was shaken by it too: every position, every

sensation, every rhythm and pace, a sweet dark thrill showering into long streamers of light, death mixed up with it somewhere and somehow. When he reached his climax at last, after she'd had three of her own, she was sitting astride him. He was staring up into her beautiful eyes. Huge eyes. Gazelle eyes . . . They grew even wider as she felt him spurting into her, and then she closed them and collapsed against him.

The clock on the nightstand registered one o'clock Friday morning when she broke a long mutual silence and said, Do you think there's such a thing as honor among thieves?

What do you mean?

Can we trust them?

He caressed her breasts.

Can we?

Sure, he said.

We're amateurs.

You trust Willie, don't you?

Willie, yes.

And Lou?

Yes.

Savestio seems like an awfully gentle man to be involved in something like this. And Greenfield with his notebook.

She turned on her side and nestled against him, one arm across his chest. She was still warm from sex, and she smelled pleasantly of perfume and perspiration. What about Jessup?

We can trust him. But his mouth was suddenly dry. He was glad the room was dark and that she couldn't see his face. He recalled the way Jessup had threatened the cripple, McGill. . . .

I don't trust him.

He's pulled dozens of robberies, Edgar said. And he's never killed his partners before.

So far as we know.

Willie and Lou would know. If Jessup was untrustworthy, they wouldn't work with him. And do you think he could kill you or me without Willie and Lou getting him?

She thought about it.

Well?

I guess we have to trust him.

There's enough money for everyone.

He's creepy.

You'll never see him again after Saturday.

Thank God.

We can still back out.

No, she said. It's just that . . . I don't want to ever lose you.

He cleared his throat. Nothing's going to happen to either of us, he said thickly. He thought of those four dead men lying on the granite bank steps. . . . And he thought of his dead wife, Helen: coughing up bloody phlegm, her face white as a fish belly, breathing raggedly in that oxygen tent, gasping and heaving. . . . Nothing, he said. It's our turn. We're both overdue for a little luck. A little dignity. A chance. Everything's going to be fine.

Jessup was lying nude on the motel bed. All night he had been working off the nervous energy that built up in him before a major job. He still had a lot of it to burn out of him. When the long-legged brunette came out of the bathroom, he said, Come here.

She stopped where she was.

Come here.

Christ, again?

I put five hundred bucks in your purse, he said. You haven't earned it out yet.

I feel ninety years old.

He smiled. We'll keep going till you look it.

She came over to the bed. Her breasts bounced.

That's the girl.

What do you want?

Put it in your mouth, he said.

She brightened a little.

For a start, he said.

She frowned. You're gonna tear me apart.

He laughed.

Sighing, she settled between his legs.

Very nice, he said as her mouth closed over him.

She went at it enthusiastically. She was trying to trick him into a fast finish.

That's enough, he said harshly, pulling free of her lips.

You'd like it.

I'll like the other better.

He made her stretch out on her back. Then he opened her legs and thrust into her without preliminaries. He slammed in and out of her with such force and speed that, by his brutality, he transformed the nature of the act. He made love in much the same way that he might beat a man to death with his fists.

When he rolled off her, spent, she lay moaning softly for several minutes. Then she slid off the bed, stood. She went over to the desk chair and picked up her panties.

What are you doing? he asked.

Oh, I got to look ninety by now.

You're beautiful.

Her lips trembled. I'm going.
Like hell.
I am.
He got off the bed.
Stay away from me.
You aren't leaving.
I've earned the goddamned five hundred! She was shivering as if the room were cold.
You aren't worth more than twenty bucks a throw.
Bastard.
You try to leave and I'll beat the shit out of you, he said. He fisted his hands.
She stared at him.
Maybe even kill you.
You'd never.
Is that so?
I'd scream.
Your throat would be crushed.
Oh, God.
I'm God here, he said.
Tears formed in her eyes.
Now, now, he said with mock sympathy.
She dropped her filmy panties and wiped the tears from her cheeks.
She stood straighter and tried to stop shaking. Giving him a big, toothy smile, she said, Well . . . well! How about a drink?
Sure. You mix.
She busied herself with the whiskey bottle, 7-Up, ice, and glasses.
Sitting with his back against the headboard of the bed, he watched her. When she glanced over her shoulder at him, he smiled and nodded. She looked quickly away, and he laughed again. The bitch! He had been done with her but then she'd gotten up to go without asking his permission first. Now, he'd have her again just to prove that she couldn't walk out on him.
Tomorrow night there would be another woman. A blonde. Yeah, that would be a nice change. He'd wear her out too. He was like that before a job, horny, too damned energetic for his own good. He had to work it off if he was going to be calm and collected for the heist. He was even more nervous than usual this time. The Century Oaks operation was complicated and would demand everything they could give it. A lot of things might go wrong. And even if it were a smooth operation, slick as ice, he might get into trouble in that clearing. When he tried to cut down the rest of them with the machine gun . . . When he made a play for all the money . . . He got tense just thinking about it.

In more than twenty years as a freelance heist artist, Jessup had never made a grab for the whole bundle. He'd taken his share and been happy. He had treated his partners fairly, right down the line. He knew that if he didn't level with them, the news would be all over the freelancers' network within a few months. No one would want to work with him. The only jobs he would have were those he could pull off alone; and that kind of heist was rare. So . . . in the past honesty had always paid.

Century Oaks was a different story. The whole take would hit two million bucks. Maybe more. And that was enough to set Jessup up for life. He wouldn't have to work anymore. Invested, it would earn at least a hundred-forty thousand dollars a year. Hell, he could live on the interest and never even touch the principal!

Two million . . .

That was worth six murders: Denver, Velinski, Greenfield, Savestio, Garrison, and the Sherred woman.

The brunette sat down on the edge of the bed and gave him his drink. She was strutting her breasts and smiling broadly, trying desperately to make up to him. Hey, she said with false gaiety, what ya thinkin'? You look like the cat that ate the old canary.

He smiled coldly. I'm going to eat the whole damned flock.

Twelve

Friday morning, as he had done every morning that week, Jack Killigan woke with a fierce hangover. He was drenched with sweat. He felt as if his head were doing an apache dance with the rest of his body for a partner.

He looked at the clock: ten minutes past eleven.

He was going to be abysmally late at the track.

Christ! His voice was an inhuman croak.

Of all the hangovers he had endured this was the most stubborn. A long hot shower did little to dissipate the pain in his skull and down the back of his neck. Nor did he get more than a minimum of relief from two Anacins, several poached eggs, five cups of coffee, or from two more Anacins.

At a quarter past twelve he telephoned Molly Barnes. What's the weather report?

Cloudy, she said. Warm. No precipitation expected.

Excellent. At least they were getting good weather for Sweepstakes Week. Look, I'm going to be fairly late getting in today. He was certain there was no trace of a hangover in his voice. Some errands to run. Nothing's happening here anyway, she said. Not until two o'clock this afternoon. Then you have an appointment with Mr. Harry Zuverbeck. From the County Board of Assessors?
That's the Zuverbeck.

When was this arranged?

He called this morning. Sounded nervous. He was very anxious to see you.

Killigan closed his eyes and massaged the back of his neck with his free hand. His thoughts were like shards of glass.

Mr. K?

I'm here, he said. Thinking . . . I've got a meeting scheduled with the whole board tomorrow morning with the track lawyer. Now he wants to come to me?

You've got the board scared, she said.

I doubt that. They're hard boys, every one of them. They don't scare easily.

You'll know at two o'clock.

I'll be in by then.

He had more coffee and Anacins.

At one o'clock he telephoned the Janifer horse farm and asked for Rita.

The maid who answered the phone said, Miss Janifer isn't in, Mr. Killigan. May I take a message?

When do you expect her back?

I couldn't say.

What number can I reach her at?

She didn't say where she was going, sir.

He thought: Bullshit.

He said, I see.

Would you like to leave a message?

His stomach burned from too much coffee and too many Anacins. He still had a headache. He was in a rotten mood, and this impenetrable servant wasn't helping anything.

I've been leaving messages all week, he said.

Yes, sir. Her tone was noncommittal.

This was quite humiliating. He felt as if he were crawling on his belly.

He persevered: Has she gotten them?

I've personally handed each of your messages to her, Mr. Killigan, the maid said.

But she hasn't returned my calls.

No sir. Her voice was neutral.

He sighed. Okay. Give her another message. But not just my name and number this time. She knows those. . . . Do you have a pen and notepad?

Yes, sir.

Tell her . . . the grass is getting high in my back lawn. It's almost like a feather mattress. I want to know if I should mow it or just let it be.

At last the maid let some emotion into her voice: curiosity. Verbatim,

sir?

He smiled. Verbatim. Read it back, please.

She did.

That's fine.

I'll give this to Miss Janifer the moment she returns.

You do that.

He hung up.

Ever since the rape in the first hour of Tuesday morning, Rita had refused to speak to him. After crying loudly for more than half an hour, she had finally come out of the bathroom, but only to get dressed and to leave as quickly as she could. If he had not known her so well and had not been to bed with her so often, Killigan would have thought that she was a virgin from whom he had just stolen the one irreplaceable treasure; she was a damned convincing actress. She would not respond to his apology. She would not even look at him. The one time he tried to touch her she jerked violently away from him. In the three long days since that ugly scene, she had used her father's servants to effectively block every approach he made to her. The worst of it was his inability to function well without her. When she had come home from California a week ago the first time he'd seen her in nearly two years he had known at once that the old desire still bound them to each other. But he thought it could not possibly be as strong, as commanding as it had once been. However, in only two days she had managed to erase the missing years until he felt as if they had never been apart. As in the past, his days were soon centered on Rita; and he was never so alive as when he was with her. His desire swiftly became an obsession. And the obsession now bordered on mania.

Madness?

He didn't know what to do about it.

She was simply no damned good for him. She was poison. He knew that. She would destroy him sooner or later. Probably sooner.

Nevertheless, his need for her was as fundamental as his need for air, water, and food.

He tried to understand why.

It was beyond him.

The only antidote he knew for the pain of being without her was bourbon. For the last three days he had paced his days and evenings with whiskey in double shots. The pain receded a bit, went behind a fuzzy curtain. When he went home after the last race each night, the pace accelerated rapidly, and the curtain grew as dense as oilcloth. Because of the bourbon he was not as sharp and quick as he had been during the last several months. He needed more time than usual to come up with solutions to the daily problems at the track. Yesterday

he had even fouled up two or three minor but essential chores. . . . When he arrived at the racetrack at one-thirty Friday afternoon, he decided to kill the hangover with bourbon. Twenty minutes before his appointment with Harry Zuverbeck, Killigan tossed down his first drink of the day. The hangover faded while he washed the glass and returned it to the bar; but he was still not in a pleasant mood when Molly showed Zuverbeck into his office.

When the visitor settled into a crushed velvet armchair, Killigan offered him a drink.

No thanks, Zuverbeck said.

Mind if I have one?

Go right ahead.

As he poured the bourbon Killigan said, I like one drink before lunch.

Sharpens the appetite.

You haven't had lunch yet?

Busy day.

Oh, well, if I'm keeping you from lunch

No, no, no, Killigan said. He returned to his chair and sipped at his whiskey. I couldn't eat until I knew what this was all about. Why did you want to see me?

Harry Zuverbeck was a chubby, ruddy-faced Dutchman. His receding yellow hair was cut army style. His suit was somber, conservative. He carried himself like a retired drill sergeant.

It's about this meeting tomorrow, Zuverbeck said

What about it?

It could bemessy.

I expect it to be.

Killigan disliked Zuverbeck. Encouraged by the bourbon glow that had cured his hangover, he resolved not to meet Zuverbeck halfway.

The Dutchman sat up very straight in his chair. The newspapers want to have a representative at tomorrow's board meeting and by law they're allowed.

Oh?

Killigan knew he was going to enjoy every minute of this.

Some reporters got the word that you expected to prove that the County Board of Assessors is guilty of . . . corrupt practices. He blinked his eyes slowly like a lizard in the sun.

Where would they ever get that idea?

Zuverbeck's jaw was set like concrete. I suppose either you or your lawyer alerted the newsmen. That doesn't matter. What matters is what you're going to say tomorrow morning. It'll be in the papers. It sure will.

The other board members and I have reputations to protect. Even the wildest slander is believed these days. Therefore . . . to save ourselves

undeserved adverse publicity, we'd like to see if this disagreement can be ironed out before tomorrow. Now. Here. Between you and me. I have the board's authority to settle on terms.

Killigan feigned shock. Why, sir! Are you saying that any corrupt practices of the Board of Assessors ought to be hidden from the public?

Zuverbeck stiffened. There are no corrupt practices.

Then what are you afraid of?

The Dutchman said nothing. He was an attorney with many years of practice behind him. He knew when to be silent.

Killigan drank his bourbon.

At last Harry Zuverbeck grew tired of waiting. What will you say tomorrow?

I won't have a long and complicated speech, Killigan said smugly. I'll just outline the facts.

As you see them.

The bastard really is scared, Killigan thought. Are all the board members paper tigers? Have they managed to work their racket just because no one has called them on it?

Killigan raised a finger. Fact Number One. Each spring the County Board of Assessors mails out a tax statement based on an assessment that has increased terrifically from the previous year.

Property values do go up.

If they went up as fast as the board pretends they do, Killigan said, every man in the real-estate game would be able to hobnob with Howard Hughes. He raised another finger. Fact Number Two. Every big business in the county gets hit fairly hard, but Century Oaks really takes it on the chin. This year our assessment went up so high that our tax bill is one hundred and ten thousand dollars higher than last year's bill.

The Dutchman stared at him. The muscles bulged in his jaws.

Killigan was really beginning to enjoy himself. Fact Number Three.

Although the tax bill soars every year, it is not necessary for Century Oaks to pay the increase. Instead, we can file an abatement calculated on last year's evaluation.

Standard procedure on every board in the country, Zuverbeck said sourly.

Fact Number Four. Although we keep a fine young lawyer on retainer to handle all of the racetrack's other legal problems, and although three of the ten owners of Century Oaks are top-notch lawyers in good standing with the Pennsylvania Bar Association, this tax abatement procedure is so complicated that none of this available legal expertise is good enough to deal with it. The one time the track tried using its own attorney it got no abatement at all. Until it hired the right

defenders. To get an abatement the track must employ very talented, very specialized lawyers.

I can do without the sarcasm, the Dutchman said.

Yes, but reporters love it.

Zuverbeck scowled.

Killigan ignored him. These specialists will present the track's case to the Board of Assessors and do the job so well they'll get ninety-five percent of our tax increase retracted. If we hire these wonderful men to deal with our current problem, we will most likely pay only ten thousand dollars in increased taxes instead of a hundred-ten thousand like it says on our new bill.

I've heard enough, Zuverbeck said.

No, you haven't, Killigan said. You were sent here to learn what I'm going to say tomorrow to learn what the newspapers are going to be saying on Sunday.

If Zuverbeck wasn't careful he was going to overstrain his facial muscles until he popped apart like a plastic model.

Killigan finished his bourbon. He was feeling good, damned good.

Confronted with a bastard like this, Killigan felt saintly.

Fact Number Five. For convincing the Board of Assessors that it had badly over-assessed Century Oaks, for saving the racetrack a cool hundred thousand dollars in property taxes, these fine hell, magnificent specialists receive a fee equal to twenty percent of what they saved us. Twenty thousand dollars in this case. All this talent is well paid, you see.

He grinned at Zuverbeck.

The Dutchman did not return the grin.

Fact Number Six. This tax abatement is a yearly event as reliable in its occurrence as the blooming of tulips. Fact Number Seven. In the riot of lawyers that churns around a capital city like Harrisburg, only three local attorneys seem to be talented enough to deal successfully with the board. One of these specialists is your son. Coincidental?

Zuverbeck glared at him.

Another is the brother-in-law of a county assessor. And the third is a man who served as the chief county assessor for six years before opening his own law office. Killigan suddenly relaxed and leaned back in his chair. Well? Does it sound very newsworthy to you?

Zuverbeck was rigid. I can poke holes in it.

Try.

You implied that the board purposely overtaxes most of the businesses in the county.

Maybe half of them. The bigger ones.

And has for years?

Killigan shrugged.

The Dutchman's hands were fisted on his knees. If what you say is true It's true.

If it is, why are you the first to try to expose it? Why have these other businesses accepted this extortion?

Lots of reasons, Killigan said. They don't want to make powerful enemies. And maybe these other victims are too pessimistic. Maybe they feel that even if every man on the board was booted out of office or thrown into jail, nothing would change. Maybe they feel the new assessors would fall into the old racket in no time at all. Better the devil you know than the one you don't.

But you aren't a pessimist?

I'd like to give new assessors a chance.

Zuverbeck bristled.

Or reform the old ones, Killigan added. Most businessmen think it's a good idea to play along with corrupt public officials. When you pay your share of the graft and the bribes, you can expect to get favors. But I don't think Century Oaks needs any favors from the County Board of Assessors. What it does need is a slim operational budget free of fat and free of ridiculously large law fees.

Rising from his chair like an arrow from a bow, Zuverbeck walked over to the window and looked out at the racetrack and the line of oak trees. He stood with his hands clasped behind his back. He spoke to the window: What do you want?

A total abatement, Killigan said. He felt that he had won. But he was a bit unhappy that Zuverbeck was about to give in this easily. He was enjoying the fight. He liked to see the Dutchman grinding his teeth. Same taxes as last year.

You ask a lot.

You ask a lot.

Zuverbeck turned away from the window but stayed where he was, with his hands behind his back. His ruddy complexion was a shade darker than it had been when he had first come into the office. Is that everything?

Well, Killigan said, of course, I don't want to have to hire a specialist to get that abatement.

Suppose you hired a 'specialist' like always. Suppose you gave up tilting windmills. One day in the mail you'd get a fat envelope full of fifty-dollar bills. Forty of them.

You're surprisingly crude, Killigan said. I'll forget you said that. He pushed back his chair and stood up so that he would be on Zuverbeck's level. Our lawyer will come to see the board next Monday, and he'll be so convincing that you will rescind the new assessment.

Zuverbeck's breathing was heavy, audible. For the first time Killigan

realized that the older man was ready to explode. He had been pushed close to his limits. He had been holding himself in check with a great effort of will. His eyes almost bulged out of his head. Will? he asked. We will rescind it Monday? All of a sudden you're awfully damned sure of yourself.

Killigan was weary of the argument. He had put Zuverbeck in a corner, and now the bastard was trying to squirm out of it. Any second now Zuverbeck would turn self-righteous and accusatory; and Killigan simply could not stomach that. He wanted to get the Dutchman out of the office so that he could pour himself another bourbon. He said, That's right. I'm sure of myself. Because you're a crook. I know it. You know it. If you don't want the whole world to know it, you've got to knuckle under.

You smart-ass sonofabitch, Zuverbeck said. His voice was low, a snakelike hiss. His face was lobster red, and his lower jaw was thrust out so far that he looked slightly deformed. I came in here wanting to deal. I'm not a bad man. I don't do anything that isn't accepted. I don't kill. I don't burglarize people's homes. We couldn't ever have liked each other, you and me, but we could have made a deal. But you had to botch it. You had to go and be a smart-ass.

You're dreaming, Killigan said. We could never have made a deal. I don't make compromises with extortionists.

With his hands at his sides and his fingers still curled into fists, Zuverbeck walked to the door.

Monday? Killigan asked, a smile in his voice. He was nicely cushioned by the bourbon haze and by the success he'd just had with the Dutchman.

Zuverbeck looked back at him. No.

No?

Tomorrow.

Killigan was surprised. Abruptly he felt disoriented and a bit ill. You're going to risk the reporters?

I don't like to be pushed around. I really don't.

Even so

And I don't like to be called names. His broad Germanic face was like a hot bronze casting.

I'll destroy you. That was not a threat so much as a simple statement of fact.

Maybe.

No doubt about it.

We'll see tomorrow, Zuverbeck said. Then, having somehow regained his dignity, he left.

Sinking back into his chair, Killigan stared at the closed door, at the window where Zuverbeck had stood, and then at the empty whiskey

glass on his desk. The bourbon haze was rapidly fading; underneath it lay a gray mist. The flush of success he had felt only a minute ago was already gone. Incredibly, although everything that Killigan had said was true, the Dutchman had not walked away a loser.

I'm slipping, Killigan thought.

He telephoned Jeff Cassarian, the race track's lawyer, . and told him about Zuverbeck's visit. In the recounting he made himself less caustic, less antagonistic, less of a negative catalyst than he had actually been.

He came to make a deal, Cassarian said thoughtfully. He even offered you two thousand bucks to help him cheat the racetrack. Then for some reason he suddenly changed his mind, got nasty, and walked out. Why?

I don't know, Killigan lied.

As if he sensed the other man's evasiveness, Cassarian said, You are telling me everything?

You're my lawyer. Another evasion.

Cassarian was silent a moment. Then: Well, at least they're running scared.

You think so?

It's obvious, Jack.

I thought so too. At first.

Don't worry. I'll meet you at your office around nine-thirty tomorrow morning. We'll go out to the county building at ten. But you'll never get a chance to deliver your little speech about corruption in government. I'll make you a bet. Five bucks? I'll bet that Zuverbeck will open that meeting with the announcement that the Century Oaks' assessment has been reconsidered.

I hope you win that bet.

You don't think I will.

Zuverbeck's clever, I think.

Cassarian sighed impatiently. I keep hearing the musings of a paranoid.

Sorry, Killigan said. It's just that a lot of things have been going wrong lately.

Sorry to hear it. Anything I can do to help?

No, Killigan said wearily. It's mostly personal stuff. But thanks, Jeff.

Don't forget tomorrow morning.

How could I forget?

When he hung up he felt lousy. He had made a big mistake in the way he handled Harry Zuverbeck. Yesterday he had made mistakes in dealing with several minor operational problems, crap that he would ordinarily have disposed of with a snap of his fingers. He had even managed to botch up his relationship with Rita. . . . What would he mess up next?

He wanted another drink. But he knew he should not give in to the thirst again. Already he had downed two bourbons. The day was just beginning. He had to stay sober for the evening races. He had to exhibit a little willpower. And he did. For almost an hour. Then he poured himself a double shot over ice.

Henry Cooper's face was strikingly pale. He had dark circles around his eyes, and his cheeks were drawn. When he sat down in front of the piano-become-desk, he seemed to collapse into the armchair.

He noticed the way Killigan was looking at him, and he said, I've been spending a lot of time on this forgery artist.

When does your shift start? Killigan asked.

Four in the afternoon.

And when have you been coming to work?

Nine o'clock. Sometimes ten. He wasn't looking for congratulations; he was just answering the question. And I'm here till midnight.

Because he knew Cooper was not the type who solicited or appreciated sympathy, Killigan just shook his head and said, Those are managers' hours.

Cooper smiled.

What have you found?

The smile vanished. Not much, Cooper said dismally. We're up against

a sharp man. Monday night after the fourth race I got hold of another innocent front who was cashing tickets for our man. Schoolteacher from Baltimore. Arthur Hudson. He gave me a pretty good description of our man. I typed it up, ran off some copies, and passed it around to everyone.

No luck?

None.

You're sure he hasn't blown? Killigan asked. You know for a fact he's still on the track?

Cooper had no doubts. I have six men working under me on this. I've had them examining all the winning tickets from the last three nights. Dumbstruck, Killigan blinked at him.

It's a hell of a lot of tickets to pore through, I know. Thousands and thousands every night. But six men can do it faster than you'd think. Recovering a bit Killigan said, Most of the winning tickets would be two-dollar bets. No forgery artist is going to work that cheaply. So . . . I guess you'd only have to examine the bigger winners.

Cooper nodded. And we've devised a water test that speeds things up. Water test?

We've discovered that the ink he's using isn't as thoroughly waterproof as the regular mutuel ink. If you soak a real winning ticket in a bowl of warm water for a minute or so, it'll start to dissolve but the ink won't run. A counterfeit ticket will streak after thirty seconds.

Killigan leaned forward over the desk blotter. Then you must know how much he's been taking from us!

We've probably missed a number of tickets, Cooper said modestly. But we can make a pretty good estimate.

Give me the bad news.

We didn't find any forgeries on Tuesday night, Cooper said. But on Wednesday night our man passed twenty-four five-dollar tickets, fourteen ten-dollar tickets, and seven fifty-dollar tickets for a score of just under eight thousand dollars.

Holy Christ!

He's going at us in a big way, Cooper agreed. The crowds have been so good, the handle so big each night, that you haven't really noticed the loss. But it's there. He sounded as worried as if his own money had been stolen.

Killigan said: And Thursday night?

Sliding down a bit in the armchair and folding his hands in his lap, Henry Cooper said, Most forgery artists are satisfied with one or two thousand a session. But this character is a real pig. Last night he cashed thirty-one ten-dollar tickets and seven fifty-dollar tickets. Although he really didn't want to know, really didn't need anything else to spoil his day, Killigan said, How much for all that?

He hit some good payoffs. Especially a thirty-to-one shot in the fifth race. He made fourteen thousand altogether.

Ouch!

You said it.

Killigan got up and went to the bookshelf bar. How about a drink? It's coming up on dinner time. Always have one or two drinks before dinner. It improves your appetite.

I'd like one, Cooper said. But as fagged as I am, it would put me out.

Killigan poured his fourth bourbon of the day.

That's not all, Cooper said.

What's not all?

The fourteen thousand.

Killigan stared at him.

Cooper was still as a post. Until last night our man has been buying straight win tickets and altering the number of the horse once or twice the number of the race. But last night he took a giant step forward in technique. He forged eight Exacta tickets on the sixth race.

Then you're checking the Exacta, daily double, and other special bets?

Killigan asked.

Hadn't been. But the track computer keeps a tab on those itself. It alerted us that more right-combination Exacta tickets had been cashed for the sixth race than had been sold. So we put the Exacta tickets to the water test.

To win an Exacta legitimately a man had to be either a damned good handicapper or possessed of blind luck. An Exacta wager was one in which the bettor had to choose the first two horses win and place in the race in the exact order they would come across the finish line. When there was a field of eight horses as there had been in the sixth race Thursday night the number of possible Exacta combinations was fifty-six. Occasionally large numbers of Exacta bettors chose well, and the payoff was modest. But most of the time the Exacta return was at least a hundred dollars and could go as high as three, four, or five thousand dollars.

What was the Exacta payoff? Killigan asked.

Five hundred and forty dollars.

Times eight. Four thousand three hundred and twenty bucks.

Puts him close to the twenty thousand mark for the night. And since we probably overlooked a couple tickets . . .

Killigan came back to his chair. His legs were leaden. How much do you think he's made this week?

We don't have any figures for Sunday and Monday. For some reason he didn't operate Tuesday. But projecting from what we know about Wednesday and Thursday . . . he's probably shaken us for about forty thousand by now.

Until this moment Killigan had thought of the forgery artist as a petty thief, a nuisance who must be caught and dealt with but who could not much affect the operations of the racetrack. However, the petty theft had now become grand larceny. If he grabs off twenty thousand tonight and again tomorrow, he'll have stolen eighty thousand in one week. That's intolerable!

Cooper nodded, moving his head perhaps half an inch.

A note of quiet desperation in his voice, Killigan said, You do think he'll continue to operate?

Sure. He probably figures that there's just no arguing with success.

And you're still convinced he'll make a mistake?

I'm counting on it.

But you aren't sure anymore.

He's good, Cooper admitted grudgingly. I really don't think we'll nail him tonight. We'll try, of course. But I think he'll slip by us again.

Tomorrow's another story.

Why?

Cooper sat up in his chair, his face brightening for the first time since he had come into the office. I have this hunch. A strong hunch. I think he came here intending to stay the week, despite the risks involved in operating in one place for so long. He'll continue to take those risks through Saturday. I feel it. Saturday's the day he's been waiting for. We've had big crowds all week, but on Sweepstakes Day all the old attendance records are going to fall. The track will be swarming with people.

We hope.

It will be, Cooper said. And the more people the better the cover for our man. But I have a hunch he's going to count too much on that cover. I think he's going to get too greedy for his own good. I wouldn't be surprised if he tries for a Saturday take of forty or fifty thousand.

You're serious? Killigan asked.

Entirely. Forty or fifty thousand. And by God, that'll be going too far. If he operates that heavily he's got to foul up. And we'll nail the bastard!

There'll be extra agents in the clubhouse and grandstand on Saturday, won't there?

We were going to double the plainclothes patrol. Now we're going to triple it. He got to his feet. We'll nail him.

I hope you're right, Killigan said.

So do I, Cooper said quietly.

When he took a shower at six o'clock, Killigan did not make of it the pleasant ritual it usually was. Like a machine moving through a computerized program, he undressed and showered and stepped into fresh clothes.

He had begun to wonder if his recent mistakes were really the first ones that he had made at Century Oaks. Perhaps he had screwed up from the start, from the moment he'd decided to move this racetrack into the big time. He hadn't wanted to settle for a modest profit that would have satisfied the owners. Instead, he longed to create a track equal to the most famous in the sport: Hialeah, Churchill Downs, Aqueduct, Belmont. . . . He wanted to change the backwoods image of Pennsylvania racing and draw the high rollers from New York, New Jersey, Maryland, and from everywhere else that they normally dropped their money. But he had forgotten, or had chosen not to realize, that the bigger the money the bigger the problems and the more spectacular his failure would be if it came.

And he kept thinking about Rita, lovely Rita, always Rita . . . She must have received his message hours ago, but she had not yet returned his call.

He had his fifth bourbon at six-thirty.

By seven o'clock he had finished his sixth.

The haze came back, cushioning him.

When he entered the fifth-floor Horsemen's Club at five minutes of ten, just before the start of the sixth race, he was considerably less morose than he had been since his meetings with Zuverbeck and Cooper. The Pony Express Girls were scurrying to the mutuel windows, rolls of bills clutched in their hands. Three-quarters of the tables were occupied, and everyone seemed to be having a good time. And Rita was there.

She was sitting alone at her father's reserved table. In a long, low-cut, U-necked black dress as dark and shiny as her raven-wing hair, she was stunning. Most of the men in the room were dividing their attention between the Racing Form and Rita. Some of the wives were scowling at her. Regal, superior, she ignored all of them. She glanced toward the restaurant entrance as if she were waiting impatiently for someone. She saw Killigan and waved.

Grinning foolishly he went to her. Here with your father?

Alone. He doesn't have any horses racing tonight. She smiled at him.

Why don't you sit down for a spell? Or are you up to your ass in manager-type work? She sounded happy. No trace of hostility marred her seductive voice.

It's an easy night, he said. I'm really just marking time. We can watch the last four races together, if you'd like.

I'd like.

He pulled out a chair and sat down.

She motioned to a waiter who smiled and rushed toward her as if he had a holy mission. Two bourbons on the rocks, she said. Wild Turkey if you have it.

Charge it to the track, Killigan told the waiter.

His right hand was on the table. She put her left hand over it and squeezed his fingers gently.

About the other night he began.

Sssh, she said. The race is about to start. I've got two hundred riding on Fancy Dancer.

The track announcer said, They're in the gate!

The room quieted at once. The air was charged with emotional electricity.

The Pony Express Girls were motionless, like erotic statuary. The mutual windows were closed.

A bell clanged.

They're off!

The silence in the room was suddenly shattered by a raucous shouting of horses' names.

Rita followed them with her opera glasses, and the announcer continuously called the horses' positions. Fancy Dancer led the field out of the gate. He maintained a one-length advantage all the way through the clubhouse turn but began to lose stamina in the stretch.

The rest of the pack surged forward. There was some jostling at the rear. The field broke open. My Lovely Annabell finished first, Diamond Eyes placed, and Fancy Dancer came in to show.

Although Rita's tickets were all on Fancy Dancer to win, she did not seem at all upset by the loss. Oh, well, she said. Three more races to go. She turned a page of the program. You have any inside tips on the seventh?

Sorry. I wouldn't even be able to name a horse in it unless I looked at the program.

You don't decide what horses run?

That's up to the racing secretary.

She bit her lip and studied the card for the seventh race.

The waiter brought their drinks. He kept his eyes on Rita the whole time and didn't want to leave.

Rita, about the other night Killigan began again when they were alone.

Forget it, she said without looking up from her program. She was smiling slightly. There was no animosity in her beautiful face. I behaved stupidly.

Maybe I did too.

No.

I think I ought to

She was waspish: I said forget it!

He sipped his drink. It tasted like all the others.

He wondered what to make of her. If the rape had shaken her so

badly, then how could she forgive and forget this easily? And if it hadn't shaken her at all, if she'd been pretending, acting then why had she put him through three days of hell? He wanted an explanation, but he didn't ask for it.

She pushed her hair out of her face and giggled. Here's a bet I just have to make!

What's that?

Pointing to the bottom of the program page, she said, Number Eight in this race. His name's Jack's Joy.

Jack's Joy, huh?

She grinned mischievously. Her dark eyes pinned him like a butterfly to Styrofoam. That's me. Jack's Joy.

Gently squeezing her bare arm, he said, Well, you're certainly a winner. I'd bet on you.

She took three hundred dollars from her purse. I'm going to put it across the board. Holding her hand out to him, palm up, she said, Back your cheap flattery with a little hard cash.

I'm not in your league, he said.

Just a token.

He gave her a twenty.

To win?

Of course. When she started to get up from the table, he said, Give it to the Pony Express Girls.

Rita made a face. I don't like whores placing my bets, she said quietly but sharply. Then the ugliness vanished from her face. She grinned. Back in a jiffy.

Jack's Joy was a four-year-old that had not been in the money in any of his last ten races. At Bowie two weeks ago, he had trailed the winner by a terrifying forty-three lengths. Tonight, he finished first by a neck at odds of nine-to-one.

It was an omen, Killigan decided.

After Jack's Joy came home a winner, the night was perfect. They laughed a great deal. They had no more drinks. She flirted with him as a schoolgirl might have done. At the end of the last race, they went to his office to have another bourbon while they waited to hear from the cash room.

By a quarter past midnight the preliminary figures were ready. Nearly fifteen thousand people had paid at the gate; another track record had fallen. The handle was a startling \$2,800,000 which meant that a lot of high rollers who were expected tomorrow had come in one day early.

You're a success! Rita said. She was perched on the edge of his Steinway desk.

I hope my luck holds.

You've proven them wrong, she said happily.

Who?

Old Farley, Mitchell, and Demlinson.

He was standing in front of her. She had her head tilted to the right.

He tilted his own head to the left until he was staring directly at her.

Farley, Mitchell, and Demlinson were three of the ten owners of

Century Oaks. How have I proven them wrong?

She had slipped off her shoes, and now she raised one stockinged foot and tried to touch his crotch with her toes. She couldn't quite do it.

Those three were the only ones who voted against hiring you, she said. Demlinson thinks you're a drunk. The other two think you're just inept. Daddy stood by you. So did the other six. And now you've shown those other three assholes how wrong they are.

Slightly shaken by this revelation, he downed the remainder of his drink in one hot swallow. Then he abruptly decided not to let Farley, Mitchell, and Demlinson depress him. They were wrong. He was doing just fine. Almost a three-million-dollar handle tonight. His plans, his publicity program, Sweepstakes Weekit was all working.

When he had rinsed out their glasses, he said, Are you coming home with me? He had waited all night to ask that question. His mouth was dry.

Where else? she asked, sliding from the desk and stepping into her shoes. She had a little trouble with that maneuver, and she giggled at herself.

What is it?

I think I'm potted.

You're gorgeous.

That too. But potted.

He took her in his arms and kissed her. Her tongue was quick and searching like a tiny animal burrowing between his lips. He felt her slip one hand between his legs.

You're ready, she said.

It's been a long time.

Let's hurry home.

In the car she leaned against him and, with that scorchingly complete vocabulary of hers, told him precisely what she wanted to do with him when they were in bed. She wanted to do everything, over and over again. They reached the house at ten minutes of one. He couldn't keep his hands off her. They were no farther than the kitchen when he started trying to undress her.

Whoa! she said. It's better when it's slow.

Sure. We'll take hours. I'm just anxious to get started.

She pulled away from him and went to the refrigerator. I was here this afternoon. I brought some wine. She held up a green bottle with a

white foil-wrapped neck.
I've had a lot of bourbon, he said.
So what?
Shouldn't mix my drinks.
That's a wives' tale.
Not by my experience.

She pouted. On her it was an obscene expression. There's only the one bottle. And you'll only have to drink your share.

Still too much, he said thickly.

Besides, this is Asti Spumante, a dessert wine. We're at the end of the day, in case you haven't noticed. At the end of the day it's time for dessert.

Reaching for her, he said, I thought you were dessert.

I'm part of it. She backed away from him. Don't spoil everything, Jack. I already opened the bottle this afternoon to see if it was good. If we don't drink it tonight, it'll be flat tomorrow.

He knew he was drunk. In the morning he would have a hangover stomach and a headache fierce enough to make him wish he were dead. That was already in the cards. But if he drank the wine he might not be able to function at all. It was Sweepstakes Day. Hours away. The whole week had been funneling down to it, and there were going to be problems he must solve: Zuverbeck, the forgery artist, God knew what else. He should be sharp tomorrow.

What a party pooper, she said, opening the refrigerator door to put the wine back on the shelf.

He said, Wait.

She looked at him expectantly.

What in the hell was he worried about? Hadn't he solved the Agroco problem at the beginning of the week? Even Farley, Mitchell, and Demlinson had admired him for that. And hadn't he stomped all over Harry Zuverbeck? Jeff Cassarian had said Zuverbeck would fold tomorrow without argument. The Dutchman was desperate. And Jack Killigan had made him desperate. So . . . What were a few little mistakes? Everyone made mistakes. And if the forgery artist were still on the loose, Cooper would trap the bastard tomorrow. He had as good as promised that. There might be a few surprises, a few unexpected crises, but he could handle them with his hands tied behind his back! Why had he been so depressed today? Why had he thought he was slipping? The bourbon didn't really affect him. No one could tell when he was drunk. He was a good man. He'd been putting himself down for too damned long. He could breeze through any crisis. He would solve all the problems. Hell, he'd already solved the worst problem: Rita was back. Rita was back. Everything was going to work out fine.

Well? she said.

I'll get two glasses.

Dessert! she said.

Both parts of it.

They went upstairs.

The wine tasted like apricots. He drank it too fast. She always seemed to be filling his glass. He dribbled some of it on her breasts and licked it off.

The glow from the single bedside lamp touched her curves and left velvet shadows in her hollows.

Beautiful body, he said.

She said, Use it.

Yes, ma'am.

Hard.

I sure am.

Use it hard.

Only way to use it.

She took him in and rolled her hips on the half-beat of his every stroke. Poised over her, supported by his knees and arms, he was a perfect target for her long fingernails. She scratched him. He hardly noticed the pain. She thrashed beneath him, moaned, jerked, twitched. . . . She seemed to come again and again.

Then, pushing at him playfully, she said, Another way.

How?

Me on top.

I've always liked that one.

They had more wine first.

When she was on top, moving up and down on him, tight as a fist on him, he began to have trouble with his vision. One moment she was nothing but a warm tan blur, and the next moment she was more vivid, in sharper focus, more real than he had ever before seen her. When he stared at her breasts, they appeared to swell, balloon out and out until it seemed like he was making love not to a woman but to a pair of disembodied breasts, fantasy breasts that belonged on a Cinerama screen, breasts that would smother him at any moment. He reached out to push them back. The nipples teased his palms. The illusion was shattered: her breasts were large but definitely not gargantuan, no bigger than they had ever been. His vision blurred. His head swam. He felt light enough to float. The soft glow from the lamp was now an explosion of brilliant colors: red, yellow, orange, green, blue, purple, and pink threads of lights leaped and danced all around the bed. . . .

There's something in the wine, he said in a brief moment of lucidity.

I want to go out somewhere tonight, she said, continuing to move

upon him. Way out somewhere. Past where I've ever been.

What do you mean?

I spiked it.

He was horrified.

Powdered a few pills, she said. Spiked it. She sang the sentence a few times. I spiked it, I spiked it, I spiked it . . .

With . . . He almost forgot what he wanted to ask. With what, Rita?

Mostly LSD.

Mostly?

Some speed too.

How much?

I don't really know. She grinned. Her teeth were as big as tombstones. She's crazy, he thought.

In ecstasy she clutched her breasts. Her head was tilted to one side, her face half hidden by black hair, and her mouth was moving rapidly without making a sound.

Out of her mind.

Then as he poured his seed up into her, the bed seemed to turn into whipped cream. He sank into it. For miles. Down and down into sweet light and a woman's sugary laughter.

Several hours or perhaps only several minutes later she said, Hey, get up.

The walls of the room were moving in and out like the pulsing membranes of a heart.

What is it? he asked.

Get dressed, she said, pulling at his arm. I want to go for a ride. Come on!

A ride? Where?

We'll figure that out when we get there. She giggled.

Bewildered, hallucinating, his heart hammering furiously in its attempt to burn up the drugs, he got into some clothes and went downstairs with her, went out to the car with her, sat behind the wheel, stared uncomprehendingly at the instruments, finally got the engine started, and took her for a ride.

When he had a couple of hours free in the middle of Friday afternoon, Danny Eugene Foxen took a drive in his second-hand Mustang. He went to a supermarket and bought six loaves of bread, a big bag of potato chips, two bags of pretzels, a package of marshmallows, and four big, individually wrapped rolls of paper towels. In the back seat of the Mustang, he took all of these things out of the supermarket bags and put them in two deep cardboard boxes which he had picked up at the back of a liquor store several weeks ago. Then he drove to a shopping center on the East Shore of Harrisburg, where he paid cash for two five-gallon gasoline cans. From there he went to a nearby Arco

station and had the cans filled.

The service station attendant had some friendly advice. When he had put both full cans in the trunk of the Mustang, he said: I hope you're not going to carry that for an emergency supply. It's dangerous as hell. Someone hits you from behindboom!

Oh, I know, Danny said. This is for my lawn mower.

Ten gallons? You must have a lot of lawn.

Acres, Danny said.

He went back to the shopping center and parked in a corner of the giant lot where there were no other cars. He took the gasoline cans from the trunk and put them in the boxes on the back seat; he filled out the boxes and covered the cans with the lightweight foodstuffs and paper towels.

Twenty minutes later he drove past the employees' parking lot and up to the backstretch gate at Century Oaks. Groceries, he told the guard who was standing on the steps at the gate box.

The Melkins-Peterson man glanced perfunctorily into the back seat. He recognized Foxen and had no reason to be suspicious. Go ahead, Danny.

He took the Mustang past the cement-block firehouse, past the rec room and the TRPB office, past the veterinarian's quarters and a dozen stables. He stopped at the backstretch motel, in front of the door to his own room.

What a deal, he thought. Perfect.

Last night he had dreamed, again, about fire. He was extremely excited and anxious to do his work.

When he had carried both the grocery cartons into his room, he drove out of the backstretch and parked in the employees' lot. Then he returned to his quarters and unpacked the gasoline cans.

He pulled on a pair of gloves and used a chamois cloth to wipe every inch of the cans. The TRPB maintained a file, complete with photographs and fingerprints, on every backstretch employee. It was possible that the fire would destroy any prints on the can. He didn't know about that sort of thing. And he wasn't taking chances.

After a short napthe sort of easily attained, deep sleep any backstretch hand acquired after years of early mornings and late nightshe mucked some stalls. He rubbed down a couple of horses and prepared those mounts in his charge which were entered in Friday night's races. Since none of his horses were running any later than the sixth race, he was done with his duties and back in his room well before midnight. He was too nervous to eat his late snack. He hadn't eaten anything since breakfast early that morning.

He sat in a rocking chair in the corner and thought about the fire that was to come. He was grinning so fiercely that his face hurt.

Earlier in the evening he had not been so happy. In fact, he had been briefly disappointed to such a degree that he had even considered postponing his fire for one full day. He had learned that Magic Pitcher, Shadow Show, Moonlighter, Mike's Daughter, and the other six superhorses entered in tomorrow's Century Oaks Sweepstakes were not in their right stalls, the stalls they had occupied since they'd been brought in during the first few days of the week. They had been moved into one barn, Number 52, toward the rear of the backstretch, where they were under a six-man TRPB night watch. This extraordinary precaution was being taken, Danny discovered, because of the size of the Sweepstakes purse: \$400,000. Now, he had no chance of starting a fire in a stable that housed a really big money horse. And wasn't that the way the game should be played: go after big money? Burn the most expensive things? Acquire, through a fiery metamorphosis, another man's profits? That was it. Sure. That's how the game was played. And when he learned that he would have to shoot for meager stakes, he had been awfully depressed.

But he had rapidly come to terms with the new situation. He was like a financier who, having sat on his money for months and months waiting for the perfect investment, gets so bored in his search for the ideal that he settles for second best. Danny wanted to burn big-money horses. But after waiting all week, he couldn't tolerate a day's delay. He would set a fire elsewhere on the backstretch and hope that it would spread to the barn full of superhorses.

At one o'clock in the morning, wearing his gloves again, Danny made two firebombs. He uncapped the spouts on the gasoline cans. In each spout he inserted a length of tightly rolled cotton rag which dropped into the gasoline inside the can, sealed the spout, and trailed four inches on the outside. Next, he got a ball of ordinary heavy-strength binder twine from under a pile of shirts in a dresser drawer. He cut two thirty-inch pieces from the roll. These were the fuses. Except for the flame which his match would provide, the elements of the bombs were assembled.

This done, he sat down in the rocking chair again.

He let his mind wander.

Fire . . .

At two-thirty in the morning, he stood the firebombs beside the door and turned out the only lamp that was burning. When his eyes had adjusted to the darkness, he opened the door and looked out at the backstretch. It was all silent and still as a snow-packed winter night in Connecticut where he'd spent his childhood. He saw no one and no one would see him. The only real danger was that some insomniac in one of the other units might be looking out a window. But since he would be moving away from the rooms, and since his room was on the end

of the building, that was really no danger at all. He picked up one of the bombs. He would have to make two trips, for he could only safely handle one of them at a time. Carrying a gasoline can in his right hand and the fuse and matches in his left, Danny stepped outside. He ran fifty yards along the high cyclone fence until he came to a lilac bush which he used for cover while he caught his breath. Only a vague crescent of the full moon was visible between the fast-moving gray-white clouds that were packing tightly together as they rushed eastward. The air was close. To the east heat lightning rippled behind the overcast. Before morning Century Oaks would be doused by a brief but violent thunder shower, and then the dawn would come up blue and clean. However, the rain was still an hour or two away. He had plenty of time for his work, and the deeper darkness furnished by the clouds would only make his job easier, less dangerous than in full moonlight.

When he was rested he crossed the deserted lane. He entered the open stable row and turned left to Barn 24, where the earthen walkway under the promenade roof was inky. He ran along the stable wall to the stall in the middle of the building. There he stopped, put down the gasoline can, and knelt in a pool of shadows.

The horses were all asleep. The cats and dogs had crawled into the straw-filled corners of the stalls, and two goats were sleeping out in the open stable row. Before very long, they would be awake . . .

Danny armed the firebomb. He picked up the gasoline can and held it upside-down. In a few minutes the rag in the spout was soaked through, and gasoline had begun to drip from it onto the ground. The air was rich with the deadly odor. He put the can down beside the stable wall. Next, he tied the fuse, the thirty-inch piece of dry binder twine, to the gasoline-soaked rag. The bomb was ready. When he lit the fuse, after he had planted the second bomb, the gasoline would explode approximately sixty to ninety seconds later.

Smiling at his handiwork, he stood up and whirled around as he heard an automobile engine behind him. A hundred feet away the TRPB's backstretch patrol wagon turned in at the end of the stable row, as if it were following the route Danny had taken to get here. The car moved slowly toward him as its two occupants studied the stables on both sides.

In that first instant of paralysis, Danny Foxen's thoughts fell one over the other like toppling dominoes: What the hell are they doing here, they only patrol for fifteen minutes on the hour, it isn't time for them, can't be time for them but they must be on to me, no, that's impossible, must be a special patrol scheduled tonight because of the Sweepstakes tomorrow and because of the \$400,000 purse and because of the goddamned big money horses, they probably think

everyone on the backstretch has a syringe hidden in his ass, they're looking for dopesters in every shadow tonight, the crazy stupid paranoid sonsofbitches!

Then he turned and ran. He knew they couldn't have seen him yet. They were shining low-watt spotlights which were bright enough to locate a man hiding from them but not bright enough to startle the slumbering horses on the stable walls, not paying much attention to what lay ahead. Before their headlights or spotlights could pin him down, Danny raced to the end of the barn and turned the corner. He followed the service lane all the way to the rear of the backstretch. Entering the short arm of the looping road, he went past the blacksmiths' sheds. He was breathing noisily. Every few seconds he glanced over his shoulder, positive that the TRPB station wagon was bearing down on him.

They don't have any right being out on a random patrol, no right, bastards, interlopers, interfering with my work, they're screwing up my deal, the sonsofbitches are trying to cheat me!

He passed several hundred neatly stacked bales of straw and turned the other bend in the loop, coming at last into that section of the lane which led right past the front of the motel-like units where he lived. Moving more cautiously now, running quietly on his toes, he moved off the road onto the grassy verge and darted from one bit of cover to the next. When he reached the lilac bush he paused only a moment, to be sure the last fifty yards were clear. They were. The two TRPB men were probably still searching around the stalls where they'd found the Christ!

It was only then that Danny Foxen realized he had left the firebomb back at the stable.

For a moment he was furious with himself, and then he decided that there was really nothing else he could have done. The important thing had been to get out of there fast. In the second or two it would have taken him to stoop over and pick up the gasoline can, they might have spotted him. And if he had been carrying five gallons of gasoline he couldn't have run as fast as he had done. He should not blame himself; those goddamned TRPB agents were the real troublemakers here! Emboldened by his rage he ran across the last stretch of bare ground to his door.

No one shouted at him.

In his room he didn't dare risk any more light than that given off by a small hand torch laid beneath his bed. He put the second firebomb in one of the cardboard boxes. He took the potato chips, pretzels, and paper towels out of the kitchen cabinets and arranged them over the gasoline can. When he had stripped off his gloves and put them in the bureau drawer, he took the flashlight from beneath the bed and

switched it off.

At the front window he parted the drapes an inch and looked out at the lane, the barns, the dimly lighted stable rows. For several minutes he saw nothing out of the ordinary. Then TRPB agents and Melkins-Peterson guards seemed to materialize out of the moist night air. They walked in pairs down the service lane and around all the stables. They were carrying long-handled, wide-faced police lights and pistols, and they were being very quiet.

He soon grew tired of watching them.

Fools, he said, closing the curtains.

He undressed, crawled into bed, and pulled the covers up to his chin.

Fire . . .

It wasn't fair. He'd been so patient! Planned so carefully!

But he wasn't going to have his fire not tonight, tomorrow night, or for many nights to come. Until they knew who had built that unexploded firebomb, they would patrol the backstretch heavily from dusk to dawn.

He was on the edge of a bitter sleep when a fascinating idea came to him: they would never expect him to start a fire in broad daylight, in the middle of a busy racing afternoon, on Sweepstakes Day! And he already knew how it could be done.

Oh, brother, he said. Oh, boy!

He laughed.

At peace with himself, counting coins of fire, he drifted off into a dream in which naked women rode burning horses down an avenue of dollar bills. . . .

Part two

Sweepstakes Day

Withdrawals . . .

One

Savestio

Mr. Bishop, the stuttering man, was waiting in his Buick outside Dominick Savestio's motel room at five o'clock Saturday morning, just as Dominick had requested. Thanks to daylight-saving time, there was still a good hour of darkness left when they reached Bishop's airfield at five-fifteen.

The Kaman Huskie was parked on the oak platform outside the last hangar. Dominick put his suitcases in the cargo bay, closed that sliding door, and turned to Bishop, How much?

What d-d-do you mean?

Gasoline, maintenance, storage . . . How much?

It's taken c-c-care of.

Dominick blinked in surprise. Who?

St. Cyr.

I pay my own bills.

Then p-p-pay St. Cyr.

Dominick nodded. I will. He climbed up into the chopper, buckled himself in the pilot's seat, closed the door.

Bishop walked back to the hangar doors, out of the way of the rotors, even though he was really in no danger with the whole copter raised on a platform.

Dominick clamped on his headset. The sound of his own rushing blood filled his ears.

Switching on the flight controls, he studied the gauges and meters, ran his tests, then kicked in the turbine. When he was up to full power, he started the rotors. At twenty-five minutes past five, he lifted off from Bishop's airfield outside of Scranton.

He homed in on an all-night FM station in Harrisburg and headed south-southeast. He maintained a flight altitude of one hundred feet, trying to stay away from any towns that lay between him and his objective.

He thought about the two hundred acres. Way out somewhere. In godforsaken country. No people around, or just a few. Enough money to buy solitude. . . . Enough money to live on for twenty or even thirty years, considering how little he needed these days. Money for a lot of books, phonograph records, a good rifle and shotgun and ammunition to hunt with, a little good whiskey and money for those damned sleeping pills.

For a while the Susquehanna River glittered blackly under him and then moved off out of sight to his right. He passed over farmhouses where morning chores had already begun and barn lights were glowing. Woodlands rose everywhere, often with small towns tucked in among them. Eventually the Susquehanna returned, and he was flying around Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

In the first light of morning, Century Oaks Race Course was easy to locate. He did not fly over it. He came in behind it, on the mountain side. He spotted the clearing and put the Huskie down in the center of it ten minutes of seven, having flown only a hundred-sixty air miles. When the rotors stopped, he switched off the batteries and climbed out of the chopper. The grass in the clearing was wet from a thunderstorm that had passed within the last couple of hours. The sky was still spotted with clouds, but blue air dominated. In the trees on all sides, birds were singing and flitting from branch to branch. A squirrel was sitting on its hind feet in the low grass at the edge of the woods; it seemed fascinated by the Kaman Huskie.

It was a pleasant place to pass ten or eleven hours, Dominick decided. Especially if you were waiting for two million dollars.

Killigan

Sometime during the night they had stopped at a country tavern and bought a six-pack of beer. Back on the road again, when she gave him an open can of his own, he couldn't remember having stopped for it. They stayed to the back roads. Several times they rocketed down narrow, patched macadam lanes at over a hundred miles an hour. And other times he found himself parked on the crown of a hill, unable to say how long they had been sitting motionless.

They laughed a great deal even though he was never quite sure what was so funny. She had a melodic laugh.

At one point she told him to pull over to the side of the road. When they had both, as Rita put it, heeded the call of nature with a good strong piss, she gave him a white pill to wash down with his beer. He took it while she took two, and then she gave him another.

A vague sense of danger came over him, even though he was having such a wonderful time. What's this?

First was speed, she said.

This one? He held up the pill in front of her nose.

Acid. I think.

You think?

I have so many different ones here, she said, turning her purse upside down and dumping the contents all over her lap.

I don't think . . . I don't . . . This is . . . He shook his head and dropped the second pill. Not sure what he had been talking about, he put the car in gear and roared back onto the country lane.

They passed very few other cars, a dozen all night. When they saw one, they played chicken with it, trying to run it off the road. They didn't succeed, although the side of the Thunderbird was lightly scraped in one of these adventures.

Somehow they had come to the last two cans of beer.

When she opened those, Rita said, You know I'm a bastard?

He was driving. He looked at her. A woman's a bitch.

The car ran off the road. He almost lost control of it. The wheels slammed into a shallow ditch but popped right out again and slid onto the macadam. The Thunderbird was moving too fast to be stopped that easily.

Bastard, she said again. She was slumped down against her door, her skirt rolled far above her knees, her legs sprawled apart. Illegitimate child.

You?

Me. Down in Florida you know the farm my Daddy has there?

Sure, I know it. I been there. What do you think?

Way back, she said, before I was around, there was this Indian stud working on Daddy's farm in Florida. Big dude. All dark-skinned and muscular. My Momma used to fuck him.

He didn't know what to say to that. He hoped another car would come along so they could have their adventure and forget all about these confessions.

Did you hear me? she asked.

Yeah.

Fucked my Momma. My Daddy's always been kind of impotent. So Momma shopped around. And when she opened up the shopping bag, there was little old me.

You're wrong.

No. Momma hated Daddy. Really deep down hated him. Anything she could do to him . . . Well, one thing she could do to him was try to turn me against him. So she told me. Daddy isn't Daddy. Daddy was some nameless Indian stud in Florida.

He looked at the speedometer: one-ten. He slowed down, or thought he did.

That's where I get my black hair and eyes and what one gossip columnist called my 'lovely, dusky, sultry look!' I'm a half-breed.

That's why my Daddymy Daddy Janifer, not my Daddy Indianhates me.

He doesn't hate you. He was dizzy, slightly sick, desperate for the laughter that had flowed so freely only minutes ago.

You don't know, she said softly. When I was a kid I couldn't understand it. He didn't want anything to do with me. Avoided me all the time. Some days he wouldn't even talk to me, and I hadn't done anything wrong. So when I was fourteen, six months before Momma died, she told me what I was. I'm a half-breed. The old man's a cuckold. And since my Daddy's a racist and a male chauvinist pig, that doesn't make me popular. She went on and on about it while he drove. For a year or so I tried to explain to Daddy that I loved him like a father even if he wasn't my real one. I didn't understand it was more the Indian than the bastard in me that he loathed. So by the time I was sixteen I was as rotten a barrel of psychological apples as you'll ever come across.

I met you when you were sixteen, he said.

You reminded me of my father.

Thanks!

She sat there and cried for a while, and he put their speed back to a hundred-ten.

Later she said, Your turn.

His mind had been wandering through valleys of color and wild noise. He suddenly realized that he had driven mile after mile without seeing the road. He straightened up in his seat, wiped the back of one hand across his mouth, and squinted at the wavy yellow line on the black macadam. He didn't know where in the hell they were, and he was

suddenly terrified. A minute later, he slumped in his seat again, calmer, just driving, going nowhere at a deadly speed.

Hey, she said. Confess.

I wouldn't know where to begin.

Begin where I did. Who do you hate?

Me, he said. I hate me. And then unbelievably, he began to say the most awful, ruinous things about himself. One part of his mind seemed to separate from the rest of him; it moved into the rear seat and was like a passenger observing him as he destroyed himself. He talked for a long time, crying as he talked, shouting now and then, talking to himself and not to her.

Incredibly, there was more laughter. Dizziness. Color, light and hallucinated image . . .

When he woke up he was sitting behind the steering wheel, but the Thunderbird was in the middle of a grassy field, out of sight of any highway. He looked down at himself and saw that he was only wearing his shirt, shoes, and socks. Rita was passed out on the seat beside him. She was entirely naked. The inside of the car smelled of urine.

He looked at his watch: nine o'clock.

In the morning?

Sweepstakes Day?

Oh, Jesus! What was he doing here? How had he ended up in this disgustingly filthy car in the middle of nowhere?

Doesn't matter, he thought. Not right now anyway.

What mattered was getting home. He had to shower and dress. At ten o'clock he had a meeting with Harry Zuverbeck. And he had to be on the track for Sweepstakes Day. If anything went wrong and something was bound to go wrong if they got the enormous crowd they were anticipating he would lose this one just like he'd lost Hialeah and all the others.

He got out of the car to draw some fresh air and to discover how they had wound up in the middle of this field. On his third deep breath he gagged and went to his knees and threw up. For ten minutes after that he was too weak to do anything but watch the butterflies kissing the tips of the long blades of grass.

Two

Garrison

At eleven o'clock Edgar Garrison drove the Mazda along the old hunting trail and into the clearing in the woods behind Century Oaks Race Course. Annie Sherred followed in her black Corvette. He parked his car at the edge of the clearing, facing out of it. He switched off the engine, leaving the keys in the ignition.

Dominick Savestio walked over from the helicopter. Is that you,

Garrison?

Edgar was simply but effectively disguised. Yesterday Annie had shaved off his thick brown hair. She hadn't missed a strand of it, and she hadn't nicked him even once. His skull was egg bald, as smooth as waxed marble. With the help of a sun lamp and makeup, the newly exposed skin was the same tan shade as his weathered face. Annie had carefully bleached his eyebrows and lashes from dark brown to blond. When he had been in New York City to buy the key card to the Century Oaks cash room door, Lou Velinski had stopped at a costume shop where he bought a pair of black horn-rimmed glasses with thick lenses of ordinary window glass. Garrison was wearing these. Changed as he was, dressed in a new suit rather than in jeans and workshirt, he felt that he could mingle anonymously with old acquaintances if he should encounter any in the clubhouse this afternoon.

Savestio shook his head, genuinely amazed. Hell, even your own mother wouldn't know you.

In more ways than one. Looking at the Kaman Huskie, Edgar said, I didn't realize it was going to be this big.

It'll hold all the money you can get your hands on. So don't forget the small change.

Once you drop us here you have to fly it all the way back up to Scranton?

That's the nearest safe port.

Everyone in the state is going to be on the lookout for it, Edgar said, frowning. And as big as it is, bright yellow . . .

No sweat, Savestio assured him. I've got enough fuel to keep the air speed at one-fifty. It'll be a straight flight, damned few detours. Before the general public even hears about the Century Oaks score, I'll be sittin' in Scranton with the chopper tucked out of sight for a few days. The state police'll need close to an hour to get their own choppers in the air and then they won't know which way to look.

I guess you're right, Edgar said, only half convinced.

It's your plan.

Originally, Edgar said, I thought the helicopter would be an old onenothing this big and expensive that we could abandon here in the clearing.

Don't worry.

Checking his watch, Garrison said, I haven't got time to be worried. You have the binoculars?

Savestio nodded. I'll be on the ridge from a quarter past five till I get the signal.

She's wearing a yellow pantsuit.

Should be easy to see.

Good luck.

Shaking Edgar's hand Savestio said, I'm not the one takin' the big risks. The rest of you need the luck.

When Garrison walked back through the high grass and got into the passenger's seat of the Corvette, Annie said, It looks like an airliner parked out there.

From the moment he had seen the big Kaman Huskie, Garrison realized that his plan was not as simple and clean as it appeared to be on paper. It was, in fact, terribly complex. The whole operation hinged on militarily precise logistics. There was really no room for improvisation to compensate for the unexpected. If one element came into play a few seconds too early or too late, the whole damned job would fall down around them in an instant, a house of cards destroyed by a sneeze.

Dominick knows what he's doing, Garrison said.

She put the Corvette in gear. He'd better. She drove out of the high grass and nursed the low-slung car along the badly rutted dirt lane. When they reached Century Oaks at noon, the traffic on all the approach roads was heavy: hundreds upon hundreds of cars, a few chauffeured limousines, and a fair sprinkling of chartered buses. Edgar and Annie didn't get through the gate and into the parking lot until twenty minutes past twelve. Even as early as that, more than an hour before post time, Annie had to park a long walk from the main building.

What a crowd! Edgar said enthusiastically. We'll hit this place for two million easy. His large dry hands made a whispery noise when he rubbed them together. Maybe three million!

But his excitement was quickly tempered by a sudden recollection of the dream which he had endured almost every night for two weeks: tangled dead men lying on granite steps, busy policemen moving around the bodies like gulls pecking at refuse, and blood that somehow reminded him of a psychiatrist's ink-blot tests splashed meaningfully on five- and ten-dollar bills.

Or maybe nothing, she said.

What?

That's what you're thinking. Three million dollars or maybe nothing at all. Despite her wide mouth and long nose and freckles, Annie now appeared as pale and delicate as bleached lace. Maybe jail. Or worse. She gripped the steering wheel so hard that her knuckles were bloodless. Her smile was a rictus, not the product of humor.

We're going to make it, he said, wishing he believed that as completely as he tried to make her think he did.

I started really getting scared this morning, Annie said. Until then I was too self-righteous to be afraid. I knew that Joe and I had been given a rotten deal, and I knew I had the right to strike back; but I

should have realized before this that the justice of what I'm doing doesn't guarantee success. Now that we're coming down to the wire, I'm beginning to see the consequences . . . So I worry. I'm terrified. But Joe was in the war a hundred-sixty days before he was killed. He wasn't sure what she meant by that.

He waited.

Swimming out of focus, her gazelle eyes seemed to be staring through him to some world beyond. She said, I keep thinking of the terror of passing a hundred-sixty days just waiting to die. If he could have gone through that, surely I can go through this.

The sun steamed through the windshield. A rainbow of light shimmered on the console between them, and the air inside the Corvette was warm and close.

If Helen hadn't pressed rape charges against the son of that wealthy horseman when she was nineteen and an exercise girl, the same sonofabitch might not have driven us into bankruptcy ten years later. I keep thinking of that. I keep thinking of Helen, he said softly. The oxygen tent. The intravenous feeding. The way her beauty faded. The ugly green wads of phlegm she coughed up and the blood mixed with it near the end. The drugs that made a vegetable of her and didn't altogether stop the pain. The nurses who let her lie in her own urine for hours before they bothered themselves to change sheets. . . . If we'd had the money she'd never have been overworked, never would have gotten sick. And once she was sick, the money would have paid for better doctors, private nurses. . . . I think of Helen and I realize I can't risk marrying you unless there's money for us. To keep the whole world at bay. To buy protection. I won't see another woman I love die because I'm too poor to save her. Never. That feeling of helplessness . . .

She leaned over to be kissed.

Garrison kissed her, running his fingers through her thick auburn hair. If you have to, she said, her eyes as bold as those of a gypsy delivering a fearful prediction, use the pistol.

The Browning was covered by his suit jacket, tucked into his waistband, and felt like a cancerous tumor on his right side.

If you're shot at, don't hesitate, she said.

I've been thinking about it, he admitted.

If the roles were reversed, she said, any one of them would use it on you.

It's like that now, is it?

You mean Us against Them?

Yes.

Of course it is, she said.

Well . . . It makes things easier. He opened the car door. Give me ten

minutes, before you go in. From now on we shouldn't be seen together. He got out of the Corvette and walked across the crowded parking lot.

Velinski

You don't seem nervous at all, Willie Denver said.

Velinski smiled expansively. Why should I be nervous?

At eleven this morning they checked out of their hotel and put Willie's car in a downtown Harrisburg garage. Boarding one of the racetrack's chartered buses that left Market Square every half hour beginning at ten-thirty in the morning, they were bound for Century Oaks by eleven-thirty. Willie complained that riding a bus was such a common act for a Cadillac owner that it could cause him to suffer a severe loss of self-respect. However, he cooperated because he knew that even if they went to the track in his Cadillac, they would not be leaving in it. There were only three ways for them to depart: in a police car, in a dead meat wagon, or in a helicopter. Now, at twelve-thirty, they were sitting at a minuscule table for two in the huge glass-walled clubhouse restaurant.

Willie adjusted his shirt cuffs for the twentieth time in the last fifteen minutes. The little man was wearing a forest green suit with white top stitching at the lapels, buttonholes, and pockets. He simply could not satisfy himself as to whether or not he was displaying the proper amount of lime green shirt cuff.

Amused, Lou Velinski said, Are you nervous?

Willie Denver is a little nervous, Willie admitted. The table was so small that while they were at opposite sides of it they were still close enough so that they did not have to whisper. Besides, with every table filled, the Oakview Room echoed with a thousand conversations that provided a noisy sort of privacy for any one conversation among them. Nevertheless, Willie leaned across the table toward the fat man. A person should be truthful with his friends. In truth Willie Denver's more than just a little bit nervous. His guts are tied in knots. Folding his hands on his belly, Velinski said, You should see more films.

What do you mean?

Motion pictures, Velinski said. If you saw enough of them, if you studied them, you'd be able to control your nerves.

The waitress brought their drinks and took their orders for lunch.

When she was gone Willie asked Velinski: How do you figure about the movies?

They give you examples to live by.

Willie Denver doesn't follow you.

Velinski waited until a burst of laughter subsided at a larger table near the railing. Then he said, Do you know who I am right now, this

minute?

Willie frowned. Lou Velinski.

Only in part.

You cracking up?

I'm Lou Velinski, the fat man said, sampling his Scotch. But I'm also Dean Martin in Ocean's Eleven.

Dean Martin, huh?

Velinski's smile was smug. Ocean's Eleven is this movie about a group of thieves who knock over a casino in Las Vegas. These guys have problems, complications. But through the whole thing Dean Martin never gets panicky. He's cool. So now I'm trying to emulate the character he played in Ocean's Eleven.

And it's working? Willie asked dubiously.

I'm not nervous.

Willie adjusted his cuffs. In this movie, did Dean Martin get away with it?

He wasn't caught, Velinski said. But the thieves lost the money in the end.

Wonderful. Do a person a favor?

What's that?

Stop being Dean Martin.

Smiling, Velinski said, I'm also partly Robert Redford in The Hot Rock.

You kind of have a funny image of yourself, don't you? First Dean Martin. Now Robert Redford.

Unoffended, Velinski patted his stomach and said, I'm not trying to look like them. I'm trying to be like them.

Did Redford get away with it?

Yes, he did.

Okay, you can be Redford, Willie said.

The waitress brought their appetizers: two dishes full of gray grapefruit sections and yellowish orange slices.

Racetrack food, Velinski said disdainfully and then proceeded to wolf it down.

Well, Willie said somewhat defensively, Willie Denver isn't nervous just because this job scares him. You can't put Willie on edge that easily. But he's got these unpleasant memories from a racetrack. They come back to him.

Around a mouthful of grapefruit and orange sections, Velinski said, What are you talking about?

Willie hesitated as several people went past the table on their way up to the mutuel windows which, according to the track announcer, had just opened. When the aisle between the tables was empty once more, Denver leaned toward Lou and said, For two years after Willie was

sprung from the can last time, he had to see his parole officer once a week and prove he was going straight Willie had to take this job as a clothing salesman in a men's store honest work, but no class to it. Willie had some cash tucked away from jobs he'd done before he was sent up, but he couldn't touch it. Not with the parole officer hanging on him. It was a bad two years.

I can sympathize, Lou said.

When Willie didn't have to see his parole officer again, he kind of went wild. Tried to make up for those two awful years. As a result, he spent too much too fast. So he had to get some small cons working, nothing too dangerous. One thing Willie did he tied up with a bookmaking ring that operated at Aqueduct.

Velinski stopped eating. He looked around at the customers at the nearest tables. Nobody was paying any attention to them. You were a bookie's runner on a track?

Only for two months.

Jesus, Willie

The handsome little man blushed. Willie knows how lowly the work was. But he needed cash.

It's not how lowly it was that bothers me, Velinski said. He thought: Dean Martin, Robert Redford, Dean Martin, Robert Redford . . . You said you weren't working any dangerous cons. Hell, running for a bookie on a track is as dangerous as they come. Track police are always looking for that sort of thing.

A person learns by experience, Wills said, pushing at his grapefruit and orange pieces with a spoon.

They caught you?

Willie nodded.

You should be back in the can!

Willie saved himself, Willie said. The people Willie was working for weren't exactly Willie's friends. So to save himself Willie named them for the track cops.

And they let you go? Velinski asked. Just like that?

Taking his first bite of grapefruit, as if he were trying to find a reason not to answer, Willie chewed slowly. At last he said, A person isn't exactly proud of ratting on his associates.

Velinski pushed his empty fruit cup to the edge of the table. I'm not concerned about that. I know you wouldn't rat on me. What worries me . . . You ever worked that racket on this track?

Willie looked up from his fruit, startled. Of course not!

You're sure? Velinski's voice was crisp; he was a movie detective again, a good one.

What do you take Willie for? Willie asked. He's never been on this track in his life. No one knows him here.

Well . . . Lou's bushy white eyebrows were drawn together in a single bar over his bulbous nose.

Sometimes a person should explain himself to his friends, Willie said.

So . . . Willie wanted you to understand why he's so nervous. He wanted you to understand about the bad memories from that other track. He didn't want you to think he was nervous just because of this job. Otherwise he wouldn't even have bored you with the subject.

Velinski caught himself as he began to adjust his left shirt cuff. He quickly dropped his hand and leaned back in his chair. Here's another time you could have learned from the movies.

How's that?

Regaining his jolly Santa Claus look, Velinski said, Well, you'd never catch Dean Martin or Robert Redford running bets for a bookie on a racetrack.

Jessup

The display room on the west end of the fourth floor of the clubhouse building measured forty feet on a side. It had only one entrance, a set of double doors that were now propped open. The walls were hung with photographs of horses and paintings of horses. Currently, the center of attention was a seven-foot-high, four-foot-wide glass box which stood in the middle of the chamber. One million dollars in cash lay on a velvet-draped table inside that box. The sight of it was drawing people to the display room like the sea drew lemmings: most of them looked as if they thought smothering in money was the nicest of all possible deaths.

Maybe it is, Jessup thought as he walked slowly around the display case, studying the casually arranged packets of twenties, fifties, and hundreds.

Please don't touch the glass, sir.

Jessup turned to his right and looked at the guard. The man was tall, rangy, with a lopsided smile. On the right breast of his blue shirt was stenciled Melkins-Peterson, and on the left breast was the name Mike. Excuse me? Jessup said, slightly bewildered.

We'd prefer if you don't touch the glass, Mike said, leavening the admonition with another smile.

Following the direction of Mike's gaze, Jessup saw that he was indeed touching the glass. The fingertips of his right hand were pressed to the pane as if reaching for the money. He lowered his hand and said, Sure. Sorry.

The guard went back to his post.

Jessup continued around the display, but he was no longer primarily interested in the money. Instead, he counted the guards: one by the doors, one on the south side of the case, one on the north side all armed. Furthermore, none of the Melkins-Peterson men were retired,

fat-bellied cops. They were all slim, husky bastards who might get high on courage, the sort who might risk a bullet in the head for a two-hundred-dollar salary check every week.

Smiling sheepishly at Mike as he passed him, Jessup threaded his way through the crowd in the display room and joined Vince Greenfield, who was standing in front of a large oil painting of a race horse.

How's it look to you? he asked Greenfield.

Three of them.

That's the way I read it too.

Greenfield kept his voice low but didn't attract attention with a whisper. Any others that aren't in uniform?

Maybe one.

Out on the concourse?

How would we know?

I suppose.

A middle-aged couple came over to look at the painting. She thought it was very nice. He thought it was the work of a five-year-old drawing with crayons.

And two of us, Greenfield said, when the couple left. Four of them, counting the plainclothes number, and two of us. He rounded as if he were taking careful notes in his mind.

And the roses, Jessup said. He nodded toward the long, red-ribboned florist's box that Greenfield held under his left arm. This morning Jessup had bought three dozen roses, emptied the roses from the box, and replaced them with the compact, lightweight, Belgian-made submachine gun which he had gotten from the cripple, Bill McGill. In Jessup's hands the box might have looked suspicious to a paranoid cop. In the hands of a clean-cut young executive type like Vince Greenfield, it looked entirely innocent. The roses balance sides, Jessup said.

It's a long time till the last race, Greenfield said, and these roses are getting heavier by the minute. Let's go back to our table.

You go ahead, Jessup said. I want to get in a couple of bets on the daily double.

Greenfield just couldn't understand that. He closed his eyes and leafed through his mental notes for a moment, but decided that it just didn't add up. You aren't kidding, are you?

No.

But it's a waste of time. There's only one bet you have to win today.

We have to play these ponies, don't we? Jessup asked, withdrawing a well-packed money clip from his jacket pocket. For cover, anyway. If we don't play them we're going to look out of place. And I always bet the daily double when I go to the track.

Rubbing thoughtfully at his chin, Greenfield finally said, I guess then

you ought to make a bet for me too. He pointed to the program Jessup had bought. What looks good?

For the daily double?

The daily double's nothing but a damned lottery, Greenfield said scornfully. You can't handicap the mixed bag in a first race. So there's nothing directly about the double, nothing you can analyze. It's strictly chance.

I know that, Jessup said. It's just a quirk of mine. When I'm in Vegas I stick with craps and blackjack but every once in a while I have to sit at the roulette wheel. At the track I play the craps and blackjack race the ones I have some chance of doping out. . . . But now and then I need to let loose, like with the roulette wheel in Vegas. So sometimes I play Exactas, and I always bet the daily double.

Greenfield nodded. Sure. I can see that. It's sort of like your ruby ring. Jessup didn't get it. He said so.

Never mind, Greenfield said. I'll let loose too. What looks good in the double?

Unfolding his program, Jessup said, Neat 'n Clean in the first race coupled with a three-year-old named Trigonometry in the second. Greenfield's face brightened at once. He shifted the bulky flower box from one arm to the other and dug a five-dollar bill out of his wallet. Get me two tickets on that combo, will you? It sounds pretty good to me.

Jessup smiled. I knew it would.

You did?

How could you not like it?

Greenfield didn't get it. He said so.

Never mind, Jessup said.

Knowing full well that Greenfield would never live to spend the money if he won the double, Jessup went to place their bets. While he was standing in line at a seller's window, Pat Jessup divided six into two million dollars. It came out to \$333,333.33 for each murder rap that he would hang around his own neck when he used the submachine gun to cut down the others in that woodland clearing this evening.

He'd never have to work again.

\$333,333.33 . . .

It wasn't a bad deal at all.

Three

The Money

In addition to the twelve clerks in the Horsemen's Club on the fifth level, forty mutuel windows were open for business on each of the first four levels of the clubhouse building. On each floor these forty were set along the back wall of the concourse, evenly split into two

groups, twenty in the west wing twelve sellers and eight cashiers and twenty in the east wing. The two banks of mutuel clerks were separated by the grandstand food concession on the second floor, by the clubhouse entrance on the third level, and by the restrooms and the Saddle Bar on the fourth floor. During the twenty-five-minute betting period before each race, the twenty-four sellers on each floor dispensed tickets almost as fast as they could punch the mutuel buttons and make change.

Since the first race of Sweepstakes Day had a post time of one-thirty, the sellers' windows closed precisely on the half hour, although the cashiers remained open. Anyone who was still in line to place a bet was out of luck. Post times at Century Oaks were strictly adhered to, and the state laws prohibited wagering past that penultimate moment. The moment the windows were closed, each seller pulled open his cash drawer. He put a bill-sized yellow paper marker on the top of each stack of money in the drawer, not taking time to count it first. This marker bore his window number, and he made certain that all money passing from his hands was properly labeled. At the end of the day he would be responsible for having a balanced drawer; if the sales figures in the mutuel machine did not tally with the receipts he'd sent down to the cash room, he would have to dip into his own pocket to make up for any deficiency. Markers all in place, the clerk now slipped a rubber band around each pile of currency. Then, on the back of another marker, he jotted down his total sales for the last betting period, a figure which was represented in a window on the front of the mutuel machine.

One cashier acted as a row boss in each rank of twenty windows. He went to each of his twelve sellers, starting from the cashiers' side near the center of the building and working out to the last seller near the outside east or west end of the building. He held open a gray canvas sack into which the clerks dropped the packets of bound money, and he collected from each of them the paper marker bearing the window's sales figure for that race. He dragged the bank sack ten feet past the last seller to the very end of the aisle behind the mutuel window row, stopped in front of a pair of blue elevator doors. Glancing quickly at the twelve sales figures, he added them in his head, deducted fifteen percent, and wrote down the resultant figure on the top of a brilliant pink notepad which he carried in his shirt pocket. Then the row boss waited for the elevator doors to open.

Less than two minutes had passed since post time for the first race. Out on the track the pony girls and pony boys were having the usual trouble getting high-strung thoroughbreds to and into the bays of the starting gate. The race would not begin for perhaps as much as another full minute.

Just before post time two Melkins-Peterson guards and two plainclothesmen had come out of the cash room door at the bottom of the clubhouse. They brought with them two deep laundry carts on wheels. Two men one uniformed, one not paired at each laundry cart, and the teams went to opposite ends of the long basement corridor. The men who boarded the elevator at the extreme east end of the corridor rode to the fifth level of the clubhouse; their elevator doors opened on the aisle behind the mutual windows in the exclusive Horsemen's Club. At the west end of the track, the second elevator stopped on the fourth floor, behind one of the two ranks of windows on the topmost clubhouse level. As both elevators descended floor by floor, row bosses tossed their bank sacks into the laundry carts and handed the pink slips of notepaper to the Melkins-Peterson men. By the time the horses left the starting gate, the cash from that race had already reached the basement. And by the time the winner of the first race, Buttercup's Beau, was halfway down the stretch with a four-lengths advantage, the two carts and four men were back in the cash room, and the computerized door was safely sealed behind them. The Melkins-Peterson men handed the row bosses' pink slips to Leroy Franson, the track accountant, who was sitting at the counting table nearest the open vault. The number on a pink paper represented the sum each row boss estimated his cashiers would require in order to make payoffs on the first race. Franson and his four assistants pulled open the vault drawers that contained the start-up cash three hundred thousand dollars of it which had been delivered from the bank this morning. They counted out nine separate piles of cash and put them into the nine bank sacks that the Melkins-Peterson guards had emptied onto the counting tables.

Upstairs, outside, the first race had been run. The number six horse, Buttercup's Beau, was the undisputed winner. However, there was some doubt as to whether Golden Rulah or Absolute Triumph had finished second. The electronic tote board in the infield listed Golden Rulah to show, but the track announcer warned everyone to hold on to all tickets; the order of finish had not yet been approved by the judges and was not final. At least another minute would pass before the judges committed themselves to a decision and the payoffs flashed on the tote. Only then would the rush to the cashiers' windows begin. In the basement the two uniformed guards and the two plainclothesmen left the cash room five bank sacks in one laundry cart and four in the other and went to their respective elevators. They stopped at every floor on the way up and passed the payoff money to the row bosses who signed for it and then distributed it to the eight cashiers in each row.

At thirty-six minutes past one, the judges posted the official order of

finish: Buttercup's Beau, Absolute Triumph, Golden Rulah.

The cashiers' windows opened for payoffs. The sellers were already dispensing mutuel tickets, for the standard twenty-five-minute betting period prior to the next race had begun a minute ago. On every level the concourses were crowded with happy winners who were anxious to exchange a piece of cardboard for some folding money and with disgruntled losers who were all certain that they could make up for their losses in the next race or, at the very worst, in the one after that. In the cash room Leroy Franson and his assistants counted the take from the first race. They compared their figures with those kept by the mutuel system computer, checked themselves and then one another, entered the figures in the books, and began to package bills for distribution to the cashiers at the conclusion of the second race. The money had begun to flow like water gushing through a complex network of shiny pipes.

Four

Cooper

Bud Teagarten was one of the two TRPB agents on duty in the east wing of the top clubhouse concourse. An ex-FBI man, like many others in the organization, Teagarten was not quite so husky as Henry Cooper or as clean-cut. He had bushy sideburns and a mustache. His quick dark eyes seemed to be able to look everywhere at once. Cooper knew him to be an ambitious agent who was reliable and thorough. A Daily Racing Form folded under his left arm, Cooper rapidly worked his way across the crowded, noisy concourse floor and stood beside Teagarten. How's it going?

Too many people, Teagarten said, frowning. Sometimes I think I can feel the floor bending under the weight.

Got your eye on anyone?

No. Just scanning.

I think I might have a lead, Cooper said.

What sort?

There's someone familiar in line at the five-dollar ticket window. I know I've seen him before, but I can't guess where. Come have a look. They went to the cluster of closed-circuit television screens near the sellers' windows in that wing. Pretending to watch the odds changing on the horses in the second race, they looked past the monitors to the five-dollar window.

Which one is he? Teagarten asked.

You can get a good look at him right now. He's just reached the front of the line. He's placing his bet.

The short fellow?

Yes.

At that moment the short man turned away from the window, holding

a pair of five-dollar tickets in his right hand.

Coming this way, Cooper said.

The stranger was quite handsome, though small enough to be a jockey. He stood no taller than five-four and weighed no more than one-ten. He was deeply tanned and had thick, wavy black hair. He was wearing a forest green suit with white top stitching around the pockets and lapels and buttonholes, a lime green shirt, and a white necktie.

Nifty dresser, Teagarten said.

The short man passed them, went down a set of steps into the clubhouse restaurant. He went down three tiers and sat at a small table with a white-haired fat man to whom he gave one of the mutual tickets.

Ever seen him before? Cooper asked.

Teagarten nodded hesitantly. The face is familiar. But from where?

The mug books?

The TRPB maintained volumes of photographs, descriptions, and backgrounds of hundreds upon hundreds of con artists, bookies, pickpockets, and other criminals whose natural habitat was the racetrack. In the five-room TRPB headquarters on the backstretch, there were six album-sized mug books, constantly updated by inserts mailed from the national office, detailing the careers of crooks who had operated at Century Oaks and, mostly, at other tracks in the United States and Canada. Every agent paged through these books once or twice a week, hoping to get the mug shots firmly in mind so that he would recognize one of these grifters when he saw him.

Has to be the mug books, Cooper said worriedly. Where else?

Standing at the railing that separated the restaurant from the concourse, staring at the two men who were sitting three tiers below, Teagarten said, Do you recognize the fat man?

No.

Me neither.

Cooper said, I want you to go out to the office and look through those books. See if the little man's in them anywhere. If he is, get back to me right away.

You think maybe we've got our forgery artists?

I just don't know.

Teagarten pulled on one earlobe. His dark eyes were troubled. He doesn't resemble the description you got from that Baltimore schoolteacher.

Cooper nodded. I know.

Could be several of them in this thing, I guess.

Yeah, Cooper said. Or this little man might not have anything at all to do with our forgery artist. He may represent some altogether new sort

of trouble.

Nice thought.

I want to know what that might be.

I'll get to the mug books right now, Teagarten said.

Killigan

At two o'clock Saturday afternoon Jack Killigan made it home. He turned off the country road and parked the white Thunderbird in the driveway beside the kitchen door.

Rita woke up and raised her head. She was still strikingly beautiful, but not nearly so alluring as she had been the night before. Her black hair was tangled, stringy, and lusterless. Her lipstick was smeared. Her eyes were watery, her ripe mouth loose like that of a simpleton. She was still naked, but streaked with dirt. She said, Are we stopping for more beer?

No.

I want more.

You've had enough.

Never enough.

Go to sleep.

Surprisingly, she did just that, instantly.

Christ, Killigan said, if you'd always been so damned obedient how heavenly!

She snored.

Switching off the engine, he leaned his sweat-filmed forehead against the steering wheel and took a moment to collect his wits. He was still somewhat under the influence of the drugs Rita had given him: his vision became extremely blurry for a minute or two at a stretch; his heartbeat was frantic; he caught himself humming tunelessly; and every once in a while he would shake his head and laugh, utterly without reason.

But I'm home, he thought. And I'll get to the track. I'll be there to solve the problems. I won't lose this one like all the others before it.

Dammit, I won't!

He got out of the air-conditioned car and sighed wearily as the humid spring air settled over him like a thick blanket. He went around to the passenger's door, opened it, and shook Rita's shoulder.

Fuck you, she said sullenly.

You've got to go in the house.

She was already asleep.

Rita?

She didn't respond.

Bitch!

Despite his dizziness and weakness he managed to get her off the hideously soiled car seat and into his arms. He staggered, almost went

to his knees, got his balance at the last moment. Not even pausing to wonder what the neighbors would think if they saw him now, he carried her to the kitchen door, which they hadn't bothered to close when they went for their wild ride. In the house he made it only as far as the living room, where he had to put her on the sofa so that he could catch his breath.

No time to rest.

Right now he was losing Century Oaks, losing his last chance . . .

Seconds counted. Minutes were invaluable.

He picked her up once more and carried her upstairs, frequently pausing to lean against the banister. He put her down in the master bedroom and pulled the sheets up to her chin.

Her onyx eyes flashed open like the eyes on a baby doll. Hey, where are we?

Home.

Your place?

Yes.

We going to screw?

Not now, he said.

Let's screw.

Rita, I don't have time.

The only time Daddy was ever proud of me was when I made it in Hollywood, she said. Her throaty voice was distant, haunted. She reached up and gripped Killigan by the front of his shirt. Her fingers were like talons, and he could not pull loose. I ever tell you that? It was the only time . . .

You told me, he said, trying to free himself.

When Daddy heard about the big money I was making, he saw a kind of . . . a kind of kinship between us.

Rita, you've told me all of this.

She had such surprising strength in her slender arms that she was almost able to unbalance him and pull him all the way down on top of her. Did you really kill your mother?

He closed his eyes.

She shook him. Did you?

He tried to wrench loose of her. He gripped her wrists and tried desperately to twist her hands from his shirt. But while the drugs drained him of his energy and strength, they seemed to give Rita a superhuman power. She held on, a leech that wanted every last drop of his blood.

Did you kill her? she asked.

Of course not.

Last night you said you did.

I was crazy last night.

She pulled herself into a sitting position, her face only inches from his. Open your eyes, Jack.

He opened them.

Her eyes were oily pits. Your poor old mom had a stroke, you told me. Stop it.

She couldn't talk, Rita said. Remember? One arm paralyzed. Her face paralyzed. Rita's eyes held him the way a shark's perpetual smile mesmerized its prey. Your daddy dead for ten years. No money. You had to live with that bitchy aunt of yours. You were fifteen, your sister thirteen. Remember? Huh? Your poor old mom was half paralyzed, and you were screwing your sister on the sly. She grinned lewdly at him. Her teeth were yellow, her tongue all silvery like a slice of spoiled ham.

He was trembling. Why had he ever told her this? Why had he made himself so horribly vulnerable to Rita of all people? It wasn't like that, he said. We didn't actually do anything. We were just naked together. Same difference.

It wasn't!

Poor old mom shouldn't have been up and around that late at night, Rita said. But she didn't know what she was doing or where she really was.

Tears streamed down Killigan's face. That house, he said pathetically. If you'd known what it was like. My sister . . . We didn't have anyone but each other. We didn't

Rita laughed. What did you say when poor old mom walked in on the two of you?

He didn't answer her.

Right there in bed, remember?

It was very innocent.

Oh, Jack! she said peevishly. Don't try to back out on your confession. You made it, now live with it. Wallow in it. That's what you Catholics need to do, isn't it?

I'm not a Catholic anymore.

Because you never made your confession until last night! Of course, you aren't a Catholic! Can't be. Not a good one, anyway. You waited too damned long to confess. But it's okay now. I'm giving you absolution! She tried to kiss him on the lips.

Gagging on her fetid breath, Killigan suddenly felt that she was more than just a disturbed, unbalanced woman. She was demonic. Her eyes were bloodshot, and her flesh stank. Her face and body were inhumanly beautiful, inhumanly perfect. Although it may have been the deranged delusion of a drug-altered mind, he saw her now as an evil spirit, a succubus that spent some nights in the form of a man and transferred Killigan's seed into the bodies of strange women.

Oh, Jesus, Mary, I'm so sick. So sick . . .

She giggled softly as if she had somehow heard the admission, the strangled plea. Then she let go of him and fell back against the pillows and instantly to sleep.

Frightened and confused, Killigan went to take his shower. The hot water scoured away the grime and some of the despair. By the time he had toweled dry and was choosing a suit, he was again thinking about saving his job at Century Oaks. The fear remained, but the confusion was replaced by resolution, determination, purpose. Just as the shower had sluiced away his despair, he would wash away the problems that must have developed at the track during the early hours of Sweepstakes Day.

It's going to be fine.

There was the forgery artist to worry about. But Cooper might already have found the man.

He had missed this morning's meeting with Zuverbeck and the County Board of Assessors. Okay. Jeff Cassarian would be upset. Zuverbeck would be furious. But impotent. Another meeting could be scheduled. In the end the results would be the same wouldn't they? A little extra time wouldn't buy the board an advantage would it?

Naturally, there would have been problems moving a huge crowd onto the parking lots, from the lots to the grandstand and clubhouse. But the track was excellent. He'd hired hundreds of good people in the last few months. They would have handled the crowds well.

It's going to be fine.

Five

Grimes

If he were going to win, Ely Grimes had decided Friday night, then he was going to have to stop living like a loser. All week he had been running scared, desperately counting his bankroll a dozen times a day. Monday through Friday he had paid only grandstand admission, conserving for the mutuel windows the extra two dollars it would have cost him to get into the clubhouse. He hadn't eaten any of the over-priced racetrack food. And each night he had gone back to that cheap little Lazy Time Motel with its scarred furniture and threadbare carpet.

Today he was acting like a winner. He was sitting at a tiny table in the clubhouse restaurant. He had tipped the maitre d' well in order to obtain a table that, on such a busy day, would otherwise have been saved for two customers. And he was nursing a full bottle of white wine.

He felt certain he would win today. His handicapping system had been working all week, but he had not done well simply because his frame of mind was terrible. That was all behind him. From now on he was

picking only winners. He knew it. He was placing bets in just two races today, the fourth and the last. The other seven events were for amateurs who wagered on names they liked, on numbers that corresponded to their ages and birthdates and wedding anniversaries, or on hopeless nags that they had handicapped with some idiotic system they'd concocted over lunch. But Grimes was selective. He had spent all morning working with his charts, graphs, and notebooks. In the fourth race he would put five hundred dollars on Lucky Bucky to win; he was certain she would leave the gate at eight-to-one, a handsome payoff. And in the last race, the Sweepstakes, he was wagering two thousand on Magic Pitcher to win if the odds were as splendid as he expected them to be. Of the eight thousand dollars with which he had begun the week money from the savings account and the new mortgage Ely now had only twenty-five hundred. But he wasn't worried. Hell, twenty-five hundred could make him twenty thousand if he played it right. It wouldn't make the fortune that he'd hoped for, but twenty thousand was certainly enough to help Clara over the rough spots in the months immediately after the cancer had finally . . .

He sipped some more wine.

He smiled smugly at the excited, chattering people at the tables all around him. They were throwing money away, treating the whole thing as a lark instead of as a business. Some of them had bought a dozen or more two-dollar tickets on the daily double. They were playing Exactas and Quinellas. They were rank amateurs, and their cash would pay for his big winnings in the fourth and ninth races.

Cooper

Waiting for Teagarten's report, Henry Cooper stationed himself at the railing above the clubhouse restaurant where he could watch the nattily dressed man who was sitting with the fat man at a table three tiers below. A few dozen racing fans had claimed places at the rail from which they could watch the tote board, the parading horses, and the races themselves. Referring frequently to his Daily Racing Form, Cooper made use of this cover. In the last hour the subjects under surveillance had done nothing suspicious. They drank a great deal of coffee, nursed two brandies, and each went to the men's room once. Neither of them was carrying a briefcase that might have contained a forger's tools, and neither of them had remained in the restroom more than a couple of minutes. They had placed bets in the second, third, and now the fourth races, but they had torn up the tickets for the second and third when their horses did not win.

Cooper avoided boredom by occasionally shifting his attention to the prettier women in that half of the clubhouse restaurant. One of the most interesting was a blonde in her late twenties who was sitting

alone at a table two tiers below. She was wearing a low-cut dress, a bright summer print, that revealed a considerable amount of big, creamy breasts. From where Cooper stood, he could look straight down the bodice and the show was nothing short of spectacular. Cooper was refreshing himself with a look at the blonde's breasts when Arthur Hudson, the meek little schoolteacher from Baltimore, sat down at the table with her. The blonde gave Hudson a dazzling smile and Cooper imagined that he could feel the heat of it even this far away.

Although Henry Cooper was more interested in police work than in women, he was by no means a celibate. He'd spent his share of time chasing after them. He knew he wasn't ugly, stupid, or mannerless, that he was as good a sex object as most other men. Yet he had never connected up with anyone as fabulous as this blonde.

How did a runt like Hudson get her and how's he ever expect to hold on to her?

Even as he asked himself the question, he saw the answer: the schoolteacher passed a thick wad of cash at least several hundred and perhaps several thousand to the blonde, and she dropped it into her purse. Winnings? Was Arthur Hudson a master handicapper, a mathematics teacher who'd finally discovered the perfect system that half the mathematics teachers in the country were always talking about?

After he had smoothed out the white tablecloth, Hudson began to lay out mutuel tickets like cards in a game of solitaire. He had at least twenty of them, none from two-dollar windows.

Master handicapper?

Or was Arthur Hudson something else altogether?

I've got it.

Startled, Cooper turned and saw Teagarten at his side. He's in the mug book?

Our little man's name is Willie Denver, Teagarten said. He stood with his back to the railing while Cooper faced him and the restaurant. Face to face, they could talk quietly without much chance of being overheard by the fans on both sides of them. He's taken two falls for armed robbery.

Why does the TRPB have a file on him?

Ten months ago he was running bets for a bookie at Aqueduct.

On the track? Cooper asked.

Foolish, huh?

Why isn't he in jail?

He cooperated.

How?

Turned over the bookie and everyone else involved.

He should still be banned from racetracks.

Oh, he is, Teagarten said.

Then what's he doing here?

You're the one's been watching him.

Cooper said, But there's nothing to see. Absolutely nothing. . . . Maybe they're just here for the races.

Could be, Teagarten said, turning around and staring down at Willie Denver. But you don't believe it.

No, Cooper said. What about the fat man?

Not in our books, Teagarten said.

The horses were in the gate for the fourth race. The lights dimmed.

The conversations quieted to a duller roar.

Should we pick them up? Teagarten asked.

Cooper thought about it for a moment. No. You take over here. Watch them.

If they do something wrong?

Use your own judgment.

Where will you be?

Real close, Cooper said. There's someone else I don't want to let out of my sight.

Who?

If you knew you'd divide your attention, Cooper said. Just keep your eye on this Willie Denver and his pal.

I'll follow him into the toilet stall if I have to, chief, Teagarten said.

Cooper smiled. Yeah. And get yourself arrested on a morals charge.

A bell rang.

They're off! the announcer said.

The cheering began.

A horse named Lucky Bucky led from the gate but broke stride halfway through and fell to the rear of the pack. Elmo's Fire came home the winner by a neck, paying approximately six-to-one.

When the race was over, Henry Cooper walked away from Teagarten, went forty feet along the rail, and took up another position by himself. He ignored Willie Denver and the fat man. He waited, instead, to see if Arthur Hudson and the blonde had any more winning tickets.

The Money

The crowd for Sweepstakes Day was by far the largest in the four-year history of Century Oaks Race Course. For a seat in the permanent grandstand or for a somewhat less desirable seat on the temporary bleachers that had been erected on the eighty-foot-wide macadam apron that fronted the entire clubhouse building, exactly 25,262 people had paid two dollars apiece at the door. Another 8,710 had paid four dollars to be admitted to the clubhouse. Two hundred passes, all that had been issued for the season, had been used. The

gate receipts totaled \$85,364, even with the passes.

All of it was in the cash room.

The parking lots were overflowing with 7,800 cars. The take from this part of the operation, including the extra dollar that one thousand cars had paid for valet service, was \$8,800 even.

It was in the cash room.

Thus far 24,200 programs had been sold at fifty cents apiece. Except for the necessary changes in the program sellers' registers, this \$12,100 was also in the basement cash room.

The handle for the first four races of Sweepstakes Day stood at \$1,685,480, and approximately fifteen percent of that \$252,822 was in the cash room. No money had been collected from the mutuel window in the jockeys' quarters or from that in the news room, but what cash remained there and in the cashiers' drawers all over the track amounted to little more than the Breakage.

By now \$300,000 had been packaged and returned to a special set of open vault drawers at the end of the room. This money replaced the start-up cash which had been used for payoffs after the first race. The track was now functioning entirely on its own revenue flow.

Not counting the pocket money of the Century Oaks employees, and not counting the small bags of money that had been sent down from the various grandstand food concessions for safekeeping, there was nearly \$660,000 in the cash room.

And not even half the races had been run.

Cooper

Immediately after the judges had posted the official order of finish in the fourth race, Arthur Hudson picked up the tickets on the table in front of him. He put four of them in his shirt pocket and the other sixteen in a pants pocket. He said something to the blonde that made her smile again, then he stood up and left the table and climbed the steps from the restaurant to the top clubhouse concourse. Pushing his way through the crowd he made for the twenty-dollar cashier's window.

Turning away from the railing, Cooper followed him.

Hudson turned in four winning tickets, collected his money and put it in a breast pocket wallet. Then he headed straight for the men's room. Cooper waited outside.

At three-eighteen, seven minutes after he'd gone in, Arthur Hudson came out of the restroom. He passed in front of Henry Cooper without seeing him. The teacher was distracted and tense; he walked stiffly with his head held high and his eyes aimed, robotlike, straight ahead of him.

No briefcase, Cooper thought. Nothing to carry all the tools a forgery artist needs. And he wasn't in there anywhere near long enough to

doctor sixteen tickets.

He followed him anyway.

Hudson went to the television monitors and studied the odds on the next race until he was approached by an old man who passed him money. Hudson shook the old fellow's hand, gave him a ten-dollar bill, and pocketed the rest.

Where did the old geezer come from, Cooper wondered. Obviously an innocent front. But where had Hudson made the connection? In the bathroom, without the attendant noticing?

When the old man had gone, Hudson went to the twenty-dollar cashier's window on the west end of the clubhouse concourse. There, he cashed two more winning tickets. Against all the rules of his racket, he was passing the fakes himself.

I've got him. And no wonder it had taken Cooper so long to nail Hudson. The schoolteacher was not the sort of man you looked for when you were tracking a forgery artist. Hudson had a respectable past, an acceptable job. He was meek, plain, and easily frightened yet even after Cooper had caught him passing the tickets at the start of Sweepstakes Week, Hudson was still taking the risk instead of cashing the tickets exclusively through innocent fronts. Only someone sharp on details, someone who realized it was odd for Hudson to be with a knockout blonde, could have gotten anywhere with this one. Cooper felt triumphant.

Pocketing the money, Hudson crossed the concourse and rode an escalator down to the third floor, the lower clubhouse level. He bought a pack of cigarettes at a concessions stand and struck up a conversation with a pretty young woman and soon sent her off to a cashier's window. When he had that money he went down to the first grandstand level and walked up to a ten-dollar window, fished in his shirt pocket, and put down two more winning mutuel tickets.

Cooper stepped up beside him. He put one hand over the tickets before the cashier could touch them. TRPB, he said. He picked up the tickets and studied them carefully.

Oh, hello, Hudson said, blinking stupidly. Something wrong?

These your tickets? Cooper asked.

Suddenly aghast, Hudson said, Do you mean I've been used again? Cooper laughed.

Did you catch your forger? Hudson asked.

Brazen little bastard, aren't you? Cooper said: You mean that tall, blond, blue-eyed man with the Roman nose and dark complexion? Yes, him, Hudson said, nodding eagerly.

Haven't found him yet. But that's okay. I've just got myself another forger, so it all comes out even in the end. Doesn't it?

Hudson still tried to pretend that he didn't know what Cooper was

talking about.

Six

Killigan

When he woke at four o'clock, Jack Killigan was stretched out on the bed beside Rita, one hand on her bare thigh. He was wearing the suit he had put on nearly an hour ago, and he could not remember when he'd lain down. He had been in such a hurry to get to Century Oaks . .

And I still am. Still have to get there. Now!

He sat up on the edge of the bed, moaned softly, and held his head in both hands.

Rita murmured, as if she were goading him to continue.

He got to his feet and took a few tentative steps, wobbling like a new colt with the womb matter still clinging to it. He was dizzy and headachy, but somehow he made it to the bedroom door and then to the end of the second floor hall. However, when he got that far, he had to sit down and rest awhile before he dared to descend the steps.

Cooper

Two Melkins-Peterson guardsone a burly man with a sour face, the other a strong but slender black mancame from the corridor into the waiting room that connected with the track manager's office. The burly one shook his head at Cooper and said, I can't find Mr. Killigan anywhere. A lot of other people want him, been after him all day. It looks like maybe he didn't make it to work.

On Sweepstakes Day? Cooper asked incredulously.

The guard shrugged.

Cooper was sitting in Molly Barnes's swivel chair which he had put in the middle of the room between the door and the black leatherette couch on which Arthur Hudson sat. He turned to the black man and said, What about the blonde?

She wasn't at the table, the guard said. So I faded back and waited for her to show up.

She never did, Cooper guessed.

Maybe it was female intuition, the black man said. Or maybe she saw you start to follow this guy when he first came out of the restaurant. Anyway, I went down to the guardroom and sent out your description of her to all the M-P's in the building. He patted the tiny radio receiver clipped to his belt. Told them she was tied up with this ticket-forging business and that if anyone found her he was to bring her to Mr. Killigan's office.

That'll have to do, Cooper said. The two of you stay here. I might need you. He swung around to Hudson, who was intimidated by the three big men who were aligned against him. Well, Arthur, I had hoped to question you in the presence of the racetrack manager. But we simply

can't wait any longer.

The schoolteacher brushed at his lips with long pale fingers, cleared his throat, looked at the floor between his feet. He was no longer pretending to be innocent. In the last half hour, while Cooper waited for Killigan to be found, Hudson had apparently decided that he was safe so long as he refused to speak. Now, all he would say was: I want a lawyer.

Ignoring the request, Cooper said, You lied to me when I talked to you at the beginning of the week. You aren't staying at the motel you named. Okay. So we don't know where the blonde went. But sooner or later we'll nab her. She can't possibly get away clean. So why don't you give us her name?

Hudson was silent.

Are you really a schoolteacher?

You know I am.

How'd you get mixed up in this?

Silence.

She turned your head all the way around, didn't she? Hudson glared at him.

What kind of teacher?

Art, Hudson said before he thought. When it had slipped out, he looked angry with himself.

Pleased with himself, relaxed for the first time in a week, Cooper said, I'll bet you're a pretty good artist.

Hudson looked at his hands.

Good at rendering anyway, Cooper said. You probably paint very realistic, very detailed scenes. That would explain why you didn't need a fancy kit to forge tickets. You traveled so light you were hard to spot. You didn't counterfeit number plates and stencil plates. All you needed was an eraser to take off the original number, and several colored pencils to draw in the new one. You could do it free hand! Maybe some could. Not me. I'm really not that good at rendering, Hudson said. But he was clearly worried now.

Oh, you're too modest, Cooper said. He turned to the Melkins-Peterson men and said, He's got to be carrying those pencils and erasers as well as a number of doctored mutuel tickets. Search him, will you?

Hudson's head snapped up. You can't!

Whyever not?

I have a right to see a lawyer!

Later, Cooper said.

Now!

Although the schoolteacher struggled, the Melkins-Peterson men found everything Cooper had said they would. They arranged all these items as well as a small, plastic straight-edge, several colored pens, and

Hudson's wallet neatly on Molly Barnes's desk.

This proves nothing, Hudson said, biting his lower lip.

There's a bar in Mr. Killigan's office, Cooper told the black guard. If you'll take a couple of whiskey glasses from it and fill them with warm water from Mr. Killigan's private bathroom, we can test these tickets right now.

When the first two tickets—those which Hudson had been trying to redeem when he'd been apprehended—were thoroughly soaked, they discolored the water in the whiskey glass. But none of the other ten tickets—all twenty-dollar place bets on the number one horse in the fourth race—had been altered.

Were you going to throw these away? Cooper asked Hudson.

Hudson just stared at him.

Getting up to pace, Cooper asked the guards: Either of you know what the place payoff was in the fourth?

Had some money on it, the burly man said. The favorite came in to place. He paid like two-eighty for two dollars.

Lousy, Cooper said sympathetically. Then he turned to the schoolteacher. You take both win and place tickets, so that you've covered yourself in case one or the other payoff is low. This time, the payoff on the winning horse was high, but the payoff on the place horse was negligible. You made so much off the forged win tickets that it wasn't worth the risk to try to pass the place tickets.

Even if I was guilty, Hudson said, more demoralized by the minute, you're going about this all wrong. You searched me without a warrant. You aren't even real police. Even if I was guilty, any court in the country'd throw out the case after what you've done to me!

Cooper stood over him, stared straight down into his round face. You misunderstood, Mr. Hudson. I don't really care if you go to jail or not. Sure.

I mean it.

Watching him closely, Hudson said, I don't get you.

My immediate concern is to find that blonde and the money the two of you have stolen from us during the week. I want the money back, all of it. Then I want to see that you're banned from every racetrack in the country. I want your face in our private mug books. If you also go to jail, well, that's just a bonus. He smiled at the smaller man; his was not a pleasant smile. She took you for a ride, Hudson. Face it.

Somehow she stumbled across you and saw how to use you. You were so damned desperate to hold on to her that you tried to pass more tickets than you could find frontmen to handle. So you passed some of them yourself. Probably more and more of them as the week went on and she nagged at you to take more, more, always more. . . . Look, I've worked my ass off for seven days now. I haven't had the right sleep. I

haven't eaten very well. I'd even begun to doubt my ability to do police work. Mr. Hudson, I'm full of the worst kind of tension. I mean I need damned little provocation to work off that tension. On you. Hudson stared at Cooper's fists and shuddered. He said to the Melkins-Peterson men: You wouldn't let him, would you?

The burly one shrugged.

The black man grinned.

Okay, Hudson said. Okay, okay! Let's get it over with.

Killigan

On his way down the stairs, Killigan suddenly thought that he might be dehydrating. He'd eaten nothing in twenty-four hours and could have gotten no water from food. He'd only drunk beer, bourbon, and wine. He knew that alcohol burned away some of the body's water supply. That was why most people who drank too much woke thirsty in the middle of the night. And God alone knew what Rita's drugs might have done to amplify the dehydrating properties of alcohol. In the kitchen he leaned against the sink and drank six glasses of water, one right after the other, and found that he needed all of it. His lips were cracked so badly that even water stung them. His throat was parched and sore. When he finished the sixth glassful he wasn't nearly so dizzy and confused as he had been since he'd awakened in the car in the middle of that field.

Water was all he needed. Just a little bit of water. Then everything would be perfect.

He looked at the clock above the refrigerator: four-thirty.

He drank another glass of water.

He went out to the car.

The stench in the Thunderbirdbeer, perspiration, urinehit him like a hammer in the stomach. Turning away from the open car door, he tottered half a dozen steps. He sat down on the lawn and discovered that, dehydration or no dehydration, his tender stomach did not want seven glasses of water.

The American Broadcasting
Company

At 5:06, the television monitors on the concourse at Century Oaks wound up the replay of the eighth race and switched to a full-color coverage of those portions of ABC's Wide World of Sports which were concerned with the big race. The cameras were now on the backstretch, and the screens held the images of a man and a woman against a backdrop of red barns and ambling horses. The man was an ABC sports reporter, and the woman was Penny Ellen Rupert, the jockey who was scheduled to ride Moonlighter in the Sweepstakes. When the Century Oaks' screens tuned into the ongoing broadcast, the reporter was just concluding his lead-in:

ABC:are without a doubt some of the finest, most exciting thoroughbreds in racing today. Everyone is anxious to see how they'll perform. But it seems to me, Penny, that there's another factor here that makes this race a major sporting event. And that's money. Without this big purse, none of these horses would have come here to Pennsylvania. Without the big-name horses, half of these fans would be somewhere else this afternoon. And without the fans, we wouldn't be seeing these incredible sums of money passing through the mutuel windows. The purse for the ninth race today is \$400,000, three-fourths of it contributed by Century Oaks and one-fourth by the owners of the horses running in the Sweepstakes. Now if Moonlighter wins, what will you receive for riding him, Penny?

(Cut to Penny's face, full)

Penny: Well, first of all the owner of Moonlighter will deduct ten thousand dollars from his winnings. That's what he paid as an entry fee for the Sweepstakes. Then you got to understand that the winning horse only gets sixty-five percent of what you call your purse.

ABC: That would be \$260,000.

Penny: Yeah. Now, your second horse gets twenty-five percent. And what you call your show horse gets only ten. At least in this race. Your other seven horses just get a good workout.

(Cut to reporter's face)

ABC: (Laughing) Well, then . . . if Moonlighter comes in first and picks up \$260,000, do you get a flat fee or a percentage?

Penny: If Moonlighter wins I get ten percent. If he just places or shows, I get five percent. That's the deal my agent got for me. But it's pretty much your standard split in a race like this.

ABC: So, if you win, place, or show, you stand to make either \$25,000 or \$4,500 or maybe only \$1,500. But what happens if you aren't in the money at all?

Penny: I get what you call your standard fee. Forty bucks, no handshake.

ABC: There sure is a big difference between winning and losing a race, isn't there, Penny?

Penny: There is in anything.

(A sudden, sharp explosion on the backstretch)

ABC: What the devil

Foxen

At five o'clock Saturday afternoon when everyone on the backstretch was either preparing for the big race or clustering around the ABC news cameras, Danny Foxen came out of his room carrying a large cardboard box full of bottles, cans, and jars of various horse liniments, salves, and medicines as well as a number of elastic leg bandages. It wasn't an unusual assortment of things for a groom to be carrying, and

no one gave Danny a second glance.

He walked all the way down the service lane to the end of the backstretch where he stopped at the straw supply. He put the box down on one of the hundreds of bales of straw. Sitting beside it, he appeared to be resting.

When he saw that no one was nearby and that he was not being watched, he set immediately to work. He removed the liniments, salves, and medicines from the carton, lifted out of the five-gallon gasoline can, and tucked the can into a corner formed by two bales of straw. Then he put everything else back in the box and set it on the ground, out of his way.

He looked all around. He was still alone.

With any luck at all, the initial explosion would hurl burning straw onto the roofs of the nearby stables and to the blacksmith's sheds. In minutes the whole rear section of the backstretch would be aflame. And maybe one or two of the big-money horses, which had not yet departed for the paddock on the far side of the track, might perish in the blaze.

He took his box of kitchen matches from a pocket in his jeans, struck one, and smiled at the flame. He lit the fuse.

For the first time in his career, Danny Foxen had made a deadly error. So that it would be ready whenever the opportunity arose for him to use it, he had primed the firebomb early this afternoon. He had turned the can upside down until the cotton cloth wick was full of gasoline. Then he had tied it to the thirty-inch piece of dry binder twine.

However, in the ensuing four hours the twine had become saturated with the gasoline by the gradual process of osmosis. When the flame touched it, the twine did not burn slowly. It flashed. In an instant the flame was cutting in through the cotton cloth and then into the can itself. Before Danny Foxen even had time to scream, the firebomb exploded in his face.

It was like a hastily made investment, acquired in a moment of irrational greed, destroying the overextended financier.

Danny saw gold coins.

Then blackness.

Silent and aflame, he was still twitching and jerking spasmodically when the fire truck arrived from the front of the backstretch a minute later. But he was dead.

Cooper

Henry Cooper was tape-recording Hudson's confession when Bud Teagarten leaned in the open doorway. Cooper shut off the machine at once and said, Something happening?

There's been an explosion and fire on the backstretch, Teagarten said. One man burned to death.

Good God!

Athur Hudson made a strangled sound as if to say that he'd had his fill of violence and threats of violence.

The dead man was right on top of the blast, Teagarten said.

Otherwise, no one seems to be hurt. No horses touched. The only building that burned was one of the blacksmith's sheds.

They know what caused it? asked Cooper.

Teagarten nodded. Last night they found an unexploded firebomb under a stable promenade. Five-gallon gasoline can all ready to go. You hear about it?

No, Copper said. I've been too wrapped up in this forgery business to notice anything else.

Probably the same nut who was going to try it last night before the TRPB patrol wagon scared him off, Teagarten said.

Any idea who?

He might have been the guy who was burned. Or that could have been a passerby. The body's a mess, too charred for anyone but a dentist to identify it. Until they know for sure, Oscar wants the whole backstretch sealed up tightnobody gets out until it's settled. He's calling in every available agent from the clubhouse. I was wondering if I should go or not.

What about Denver and that fat man? Cooper asked.

A look of disappointment on his face, Teagarten said, Nothing. I think they're really just here to play the ponies. The day's almost overand nothin'.

Okay, Cooper said. Don't upset the boss. You go to the backstretch and help out there. I'll finish up here. As soon as I get word about the woman who was half of this forgery team, I'll skip on down and take a look at Denver and his friend.

It's been a damned good crowd today, Teagarten said. You can probably hold the fort yourself. He smiled and left.

Aspin

For the purposes of ABC's Wide World of Sports, the last race, the Century Oaks Sweepstakes, had to be moved up from five-thirty to a quarter of six. This left fifteen minutes more time between the eighth and ninth races than between any other two races all day long. Partly to fill this time and partly because it was a natural culmination of a week-long promotional stunt, there was to be a thousand-dollar drawing at five-fifteen. Jack Killigan was supposed to officiate from the winner's circle in front of the clubhouse.

But Killigan had disappeared.

Ten minutes after the drawing should have been held, Roy Aspin, publicity director for Century Oaks, felt that he could not postpone the event any longer. He took Killigan's place beside the large wire lottery

drum which contained a stub from every admission ticket sold for Sweepstakes Day. He waited while the track announcer who was also in the winner's circle, trailing the cord from a hand microphone gave the drum a good spin to mix up the thousands of bits of cardboard. Then he opened the door in the top of the drum, reached inside, and plucked out the winning number. He gave it to the announcer. The lucky ticket is . . . The announcer paused for dramatic effect, and Aspin wished he'd get the hell on with it. Check the bottom of your tickets, now . . . Who has number . . . 000224? That's 0 . . . 0 . . . 0 . . . 2 . . . 4. One of the first admissions of the day. If you've got the lucky ticket, go to the nearest uniformed track policeman and ask him to bring you down here to the winner's circle. Come on now, Mr. 000224!

Garrison

At five-thirty Edgar Garrison left his seat in the crowded, smoke-filled Saddle Bar and walked to the extreme east end of the top clubhouse concourse. Boldly, without looking around to see if he were being watched, Edgar pushed open a black door labeled no public admittance. He was counting on the throng of racing fans behind him to block him from the view of any security guard who happened to be looking this way. He went through the door, let it swing shut behind him, and waited to see if he had been followed. When no one came after him, he went down eight flights of concrete steps and stopped just inside the archway that opened onto the long basement corridor. He unbuttoned his suit jacket and took the Browning M-35 high-power pistol from his waistband. He checked his right pants pocket to be sure that he had the spare thirteen-shot magazine. Clicking off the Browning's safety, he jacked a bullet into the chamber. Now he was ready.

Footsteps sounded in the stairway overhead.

Edgar raised the pistol and aimed at the center of the landing. His hand was trembling, but not much. He was surprised at how cool he was.

Willie Denver came around the corner onto the landing, saw the gun, and said, How dead would Willie be if he wasn't Willie?

Very, Garrison said.

You sound mean.

I guess I can be.

Edgar no longer had the slightest doubt that he would kill if he were left with no other reasonable choice. Not long ago he would have been incapable of murder. However, having contemplated it over the last several weeks, he no longer found it unthinkable. The conception was more than father to the act; it was the act in an infant stage. First, he had realized that he could kill in certain circumstances. And then he

decided that there were no degrees of villainy when it came to murder: a man was either a killer or he was not; he could no more be in between than a woman could be a little bit pregnant. And if he were a killer, then he must face it and employ his ruthlessness any time he needed to save himself. Initially he had been depressed at this thought and wondered if he were, in essence, no better than Pat Jessup. But he soon saw that he was indeed different from Jessup because Jessup would enjoy killing someone.

Lou's waiting up there to see if anyone followed him and Willie, Willie said.

A few seconds later Velinski appeared on the landing, enormous in the confined space. Unlike Willie, he had made no sound coming down the steps. You know who I feel like? the fat man asked them.

Robert Redford, Willie said.

Not anymore, Velinski said. Now I feel like Richard Burton in Where Eagles Dare. You know what I mean? The hero far behind the German lines, skulking through the enemy installation, risking discovery with every step he takes . . .

You're spooking Willie, Willie said.

Definitely Richard Burton. And maybe Gregory Peck in The Guns of Navarone. Same difference.

Garrison shook his head. You're something else.

Thank you.

You ready to do some skulking?

As planned, Velinski said.

Willie said, You first.

Turing away from them, Edgar went down the last step and put his back to the concrete wall next to the archway.

It is like an old movie, he thought.

He peered cautiously around the corner into the basement corridor. It was empty. The rotating camera slung from the ceiling in the center of the hall was just beginning to grind through this half of its circular track. He pulled his head back and counted seconds, just as Annie did when she exercised before bed each night.

One, ele-phan-tine.

Two, ele-phan-tine.

When she'd taken her tour of the racetrack a week ago today, Annie had found that the cash room guardian camera took twenty-eight seconds to make a full sweep.

Three, ele-phan-tine.

Four, ele-phan-tine.

Therefore, this half of the hall would be monitored for fourteen seconds, then unmonitored for fourteen more.

Five, ele-phan-tine.

They would have to run, one at a time in order not to get in each other's way, to the blind spot that lay directly beneath the camera mount.

Six, ele-phan-tine.

Seven . . .

Once they were assembled under the camera, they could take the cash room by surprise.

Eight, ele-phan-tine.

The trick was not to cover the distance in fourteen seconds although making ninety yards in that time was not an easy mark for the average man but to cover it quietly in fourteen seconds. If they made too much noise, they were finished.

Nine, ele-phan-tine.

Ten, ele-phan-tine.

Eleven . . .

They had all been practicing the run and had managed to beat the clock in practice. But under the pressure of the real thing, they might not do as well as they had done at home.

Twelve, ele-phan-tine.

Thirteen, ele-phan-tine.

He thought of shattering glass and ripping bullets and granite steps marbled with scarlet threads.

Fourteen!

Edgar glanced around the corner.

The lens swung away from this half of the hall.

He ran as if pursued. He stayed up on his toes, making not much more noise than a cat. His arms were out at his sides like wings half-furled, the Browning thrust in front of him. He reached the blind spot and almost ran past it into the west end of the hall where, with a second or two of its track remaining, the cameras would have picked him up and set off an alarm. With not an inch to spare, he caught himself. He swayed on his toes, waved his arms in circles, regained his balance, and came down flat on his feet.

Crouching, he whirled around and looked back at the archway.

Having observed his flight Willie and Lou leaned back out of sight as the camera swung toward them.

The next fourteen seconds were the longest of Garrison's life. He was expecting the cash room door to roll open, and he knew he would never be able to hold off the guard all by himself.

When the camera finally began a new circuit, Willie came out of the stairwell, running lightly, his head tucked down, his white tie flapping. His eyes bulged, and his mouth was drawn wide in a silent scream. He made considerably more noise than Garrison had done, but not enough to attract the attention of the men inside the cash

room.

Each of the next fourteen seconds was an eternity.

Like a creature from a cartoon, his vast gut bouncing and jiggling in advance of him, Lou Velinski ran out into the corridor. He skipped rather than walked. His feet seemed absurdly tiny for the rest of him; he was a hippopotamus that had been given the graceful hooves of a deer.

Four, ele-phan-tine.

Five, ele-phan-tine.

He held his fat arms out at his sides, his stubby-fingered hands poised daintily as if they were holding priceless china demitasse cups.

Six, ele-phan-tine.

If their lives had not depended upon his success, Lou Velinski might have been a comic figure. Instead, he terrified Garrison. He made far less noise than either Willie or Edgar had done but he was so slow.

Seven, ele-phan-tine.

Velinski wasn't halfway through the run yet, but he had used up half his time.

Eight, ele-phan-tine.

Conscious of the cash room door on their right, Willie whispered in the lowest voice he could manage: Hurry!

Nine, ele-phan-tine.

Abruptly Velinski's expression changed. He had been scowling fiercely, his white brows beetled, jowls strained, mouth grim, and eyes almost squeezed shut. But now he must have remembered that he was partly Richard Burton and partly Gregory Peck, for his face became brighter. The lines of it softened. He was almost smiling. And, by God, he was running faster!

Ten, ele-phan-tine.

Eleven . . .

Edgar looked up at the television camera. It was grinding inexorably around toward Velinski. He prayed for a power failure.

Twelve, ele-phan-tine.

Thirteen, ele-phan-tine.

Bouncing at them like a gigantic beach ball, Velinski glanced at the camera for the first time. He gasped. He threw everything he had into one last leap.

Fourteen . . .

The fat man bounded into the blind spot precisely as the camera swung into the eastern arm of the long hallway. Carried away by his momentum, Velinski ran five or six mincing steps into the west end of the corridor before he could stop himself. Grinning, he came back to them.

No one spoke.

Shaking, pale beneath his tan, Willie took his pistol from under his belt, slipped off the safety, and jacked a shell into the firing chamber. Velinski did the same. Then he unbuttoned his inside jacket pocket and brought out the white plastic key card that would if he had not been cheated by his New York contact, a possibility that haunted all of them open the cash room door. He looked inquiringly at Garrison. Edgar nodded.

Stepping up to the steel door, Velinski slid the card into the slot where the track computer could read it. For a moment nothing happened, and intimations of disaster flashed through all their minds. Then the card was ejected into Velinski's hand, and the door rolled open. They went inside fast.

Ten men were in the room. Five civilians were counting cash at the tables near the open vault. At this end of the room there were three uniformed guards and two plainclothesmen. Everyone looked surprised when Garrison, Denver, and Velinski came in with their guns drawn. A Melkins-Peterson man shouted something unintelligible and went for his .38 Special.

Freeze! Garrison said. Or you'll be a gut-shot.

Grimes

Ely Grimes followed the track policeman down the outside clubhouse steps, along the white paddock fence to the winner's circle. Even with the musky odor of horses, the warm air smelled fresh and clean. The sky was high, wide, and blue. Ely had not felt so good in months. When his number came up in the thousand-dollar drawing, Ely saw this as more than an isolated bit of good luck. It was an omen of bright times ahead, a fresh start, a new beginning. From now on, he couldn't lose. He knew it.

Somehow Lucky Bucky had lost in the fourth race. The odds on that horse had been an incredible twelve-to-one when the mutuel windows closed. Ely's five hundred dollars to win would have returned six thousand! And the damned horse had been a shoo-in! Look at the bloodlines, the past performances, the class in which it was running! It broke well from the gate. Straightaway it moved ahead of the field. That damned horse had everything going for it: a fast track, a strong heart, a desire to compete, great form, a working jockey . . . and then it had broken stride, cantered off toward the rail, fell to the very end of the pack. Something had startled it. Maybe there had been a stone or gutter on the track or a piece of wind-blown cellophane that, glittering with sunlight, had caught Lucky Bucky's eye. The goddamned track was supposed to be fine-graded. Fine-graded between every race! What had happened?

Well, it's past history, Grimes told himself happily. Forget it. All you've got to think about now is the future, the last race, Magic

Pitcher romping in at six-to-one.

While the track publicity director, Roy Aspin, wrote Grimes's name on the thousand-dollar check, the announcer said, Our winner is Mr. Ely Grimes from Tenaflly, New Jersey. One of the real early birds for Sweepstakes Day. He turned to Ely. What will you do with the thousand dollars, Mr. Grimes?

Ely tried to back away from the microphone the other man had thrust into his face. Uh . . . Bet it, he said. On a horse.

The fans liked his spirit. There were cheers and applause from the grandstand and from the temporary bleachers.

While photographs were taken, Roy Aspin presented the check to Ely and shook his hand. Three newspaper reporters, two with cameras, were the only other people in the winner's circle now that the announcer had returned to his roost on the fifth floor.

Not bothering to smile for the camera, Ely said, Will this pass at one of your mutuel windows?

The check? Aspin asked. No. By state law they're only allowed to take currency.

They stopped shaking hands as the reporters began to put away their cameras.

Holding out the check Grimes said, Then will you please cash this for me?

Now?

Right now, yes.

Well . . . sure, Aspin said. As soon as the Sweepstakes is over, I'll I need it for that last race, Ely said.

Aspin scratched his head and thought about it for a moment. Looking at the tote board in the infield, Aspin said, There's only nine minutes left until post time. I don't see how we could cash it fast enough for you to make it to a window. I

Ely was desperate. If he were to go home with a real nest egg for Clara, then he had to get this money down on Magic Pitcher. His voice rose as he said, If you can't cash it, then I don't want it.

One of the reporters moved in closer. What's this?

Taking the check from Ely's hand, Aspin said, Nothing.

He doesn't want the check, the reporter said.

He wants betting money instead, Aspin said. He smiled at Ely and then at each of the reporters. And we'll certainly oblige.

Now? Ely asked.

The track accountant's in the basement cash room, Aspin said. He'll authorize it and give you your money. You should be able to make the mutuel window.

Let's hurry, Ely said. He followed Aspin out of the winner's circle.

Seven

Jessup

He stepped through the double doors, and Greenfield came in right behind him.

Eight minutes before post time for the Sweepstakes, only five people remained in the display room on the fourth level of the clubhouse building. Most of the fans had either returned to their seats in anticipation of the big race or were lined up at the mutuel windows. An attractive young couple stood in front of the glass case which held the million dollars; they were asking questions of a Melkins-Peterson guard, and he was giving them detailed answers while he ogled the girl. The other two guards, too confident now that they had come to the end of an uneventful week, were standing together at one end of the room. They gave Jessup and Greenfield a onceover, dismissed them, and went back to a heated argument about the relative merits of the thoroughbreds entered in the Sweepstakes.

Look good? Jessup said.

Perfect, Greenfield said.

Let's hit 'em.

Greenfield put down the large briefcase that he was carrying, reached into it, and brought out a foot-square cardboard sign. The sign came complete with a string to hang it by, and it said closed in red letters against a white background. Greenfield had made it himself. Trying to act with casual authority, not wanting to call the guards' attention away from their argument, he slipped the sign over one of the outside doorknobs, then turned back into the room.

Stopping half a dozen steps from the door, Pat Jessup dropped the lid from the flower box he was carrying. At the same moment Greenfield pulled the double doors shut and put his back to them.

Hey, what's this! one of the guards said.

Jessup let the bottom of the box fall to the floor, and he swung the wicked-looking Belgian weapon up against his hip. From that position, he could make one sudden arc that would chop all five of them into dead meat. He grinned.

The Melkins-Peterson men stared intently at the air-cooled barrel of the submachine gun. They had all seen their share of war movies, and now those celluloid slaughters came back to haunt them: the tatatatatatatat, the blood-curdling screams, the impassable wall of bullets, the tumbling lines of enemy soldiers. . . . None of them tried for his revolver.

Nobody's going to get hurt if everyone plays the game, Jessup told them.

You won't get away with it, the guard named Mike said.

Ignoring him, Jessup used the barrel of the gun to motion to the other guard and the young couple. Over with those two and be quick about

it.

They did what he asked, lining up to one side of the glass money case. Good, Jessup said. Now all but the girl lay down on your stomach, flat on the floor.

The guy who was with the young woman frowned. What are you going to do to her?

Nothing, Jessup said. Unless you start getting wise. If you start getting wise, I'll kill her.

Nobody moved.

Down, you bastards!

They flinched as he gestured with the submachine gun, and they did as they were told. The girl stood behind them, arms slack at her sides, face pale, waiting.

Now, Jessup said, no matter how vulnerable you may think I am at any given moment, don't try to go for a gun. I'm never vulnerable. I've done this sort of thing a hundred times, and I've never even come close to getting shot. Okay?

No one said anything.

Greenfield left the doors. He carried his briefcase across the room and put it down beside the girl. He took several pieces of equipment from it, including a pair of gloves, and then he went straight to the far side of the glass case.

Jessup circled warily behind the prone men, keeping the gun steady on them. Okay, he said, hold hands with yourself behind your back. A couple of them didn't get it. He had to tell them again, in an ugly tone of voice this time. When they all had their hands behind their backs, he said to the girl: What's your name?

My name?

That's the question.

She was a slim brunette with dark eyes and a wide mouth. Nice large breasts. A showgirl's legs. Class. Pamela, she said. She was subdued but not frightened.

Pamela, Jessup said, in that briefcase you'll find four big rolls of two-inch-wide adhesive tape. And a pair of scissors. I want you to go down the line here and tape together each man's hands. But don't cut the roll when you go from one to the other. When you're done, each set of hands should be taped together and to every other set of hands.

Understand?

She nodded.

Then tape their mouths, separately. Then do their ankles just like you did their hands, not wasting any time to cut the tape. Don't try to give them room to work loose. I'll see right away. It won't work.

She bent toward the briefcase.

And Pamela?

She looked up at him.

Don't get any idea about the scissors, Jessup said, smiling. Before you could get to me, I'd have pumped twenty bullets into those pretty tits of yours.

There was pure loathing in her face. She glared at him for a moment, then set to work. She wasted no time on the chore and was finished three minutes before post time, when Greenfield was in the final stages of his work on the glass money case. She had done a sloppy job, but the tape would hold them long enough for Jessup's purposes.

On your belly, Jessup told her.

She stretched out and put her hands behind her back.

He moved in on her, lowered the barrel of the gun, and raised her skirt to her hips.

Nice, he said.

She didn't reply.

He gently poked the barrel of the gun between her smooth, stockinged thighs.

She stiffened.

Laughing softly Jessup used the submachine gun to probe intimately at her ripe buttocks. When she said nothing and did not even squirm under the metallic caress, he gave up. He knelt beside her and bound her with adhesive tape.

She was too smart to struggle with him and get herself killed, but she wasn't going to give in as meekly as the four men had done. When Jessup tried to tape her mouth, she bit his fingers. It hurt, but he would not let her know that. He laughed again and slapped her face twice. Stunned by the blows, she could not avoid the tape this time.

On the other side of the bulletproof, shatterproof display case, Vince Greenfield was almost through to the money. He had planted two nine-inch suction cups firmly in the center line of the seven-by-four-foot pane. Using a diamond-tipped glass cutter he outlined a five-by-two-foot rectangle in the middle of the pane and repeatedly scored the glass along the same lines. Next, he used a stainless steel and rubber eye-dropper to transfer acid from a small steel bottle to the shallow grooves he had made in the display case. Where the yellowish fluid streamed across the smooth, glazed surface there was no reaction whatsoever; but where it seeped into the grooves that were cut below the protective glaze, it bubbled and smoked furiously.

Sniffing at the fumes Jessup said, Stinks.

Greenfield nodded.

What would it do to your skin?

Not much. It's a combination of two acids that are specific agents. One works on silicate molecules; the other eats lead.

There's lead in the glass?

Sure. It's bulletproof, full of lead compounds. But it can't stand up to this stuff.

We hope. Jessup looked back at the five prisoners. They were behaving themselves. How long? he asked Greenfield.

About now.

It's nearly post time.

Don't worry, Greenfield said.

I'm not worried. Just reminding you.

Get the briefcase, Greenfield said.

Jessup did that.

Getting to his feet Greenfield gripped the hard plastic handles on the backs of the two suction cups. He tugged once, twice, waited a moment and tugged again. The third time a five-by-two-foot piece of glass came away, and he cautiously lowered it to the floor. By going in the side of the box, they had bypassed the lock and the alarm connected to the lock; there was a sizeable hole in the side of the display case, but no bells were ringing.

Grimes

When the door opened on the basement cash room, Ely Grimes followed Roy Aspin into a room full of armed men.

You move you're dead, a bald man told them. He was a tall, tough-looking sonofabitch.

Even coming by surprise, the scenario was clear to Grimes. There were seven people, including two uniformed track guards, lined up against the far wall. They had their hands flat on the wall and their legs spread as if they were waiting to be frisked. Three other men, only one of these in uniform, were lying on the floor, bound with adhesive tape. The bald man and the two armed men with him were quite obviously thieves.

Up against the wall with the others, the bald man said.

Aspin said, You'll never get away with it.

The wall, the bald man said impatiently.

Aspin went over to join the lineup.

As if listening from a very great distance, Ely heard himself say, No.

The thieves stared at him, incredulous.

Magic Pitcher at six-to-one. Last chance. Got to give Clara something. Magic Pitcher. Sure thing!

This is no time for jokes, the fat one said, as if he were scolding a child. He had a beautiful smile that didn't go with the pistol in his hand.

You don't realize . . . Grimes said. I've got to cash my check so I can put it on Magic Pitcher. It's a sure thing. If you'll just cash my check and let me go place a bet, I won't tell anyone you're down here. I swear! I really swear!

Babbling, the fat man said, starting purposefully toward him. Ely backed up a step. No, wait. I've lost six thousand bucks this week. Crazy system. But it works! And the mortgage, the money I took from the savings account! I've got to make it good, you see. I have to give Clara a nest egg. When I'm dead . . . I . . . Don't you understand? Sure, sure, the fat man said, smiling warmly and reaching for his arm. Dammit, no! Grimes shouted. He turned and ran through the open door into the basement corridor.

The fat man shouted.

Running, Ely looked over his shoulder and saw the fat man pointing a pistol. He was kicked in the back. He heard a thunderous roar, slipped, fell, and slid along the concrete on his face.

His last thoughts were like the exploding fragments of a hand grenade: Life insurance, ten grand, double indemnity, so make it twenty grand, Clara's nest egg, some systems do work, they really do, twenty thousand and it's a sure thing and why didn't I ever look at it like that before?

Then he heard a horse's hooves pounding toward him, even though he could not see any horse. Pounding . . . pounding . . . And when the invisible beast went past there wasn't anything behind it except an endlessly flowing tail as black as the depths of space.

Jessup

Greenfield came out of the display case with the last of the million dollars. He managed to jam it down into the briefcase. You couldn't get another buck in there, he said.

One minute until post time. The announcer's voice boomed out of the overhead speakers.

Cutting it close, Jessup said.

Greenfield knelt to latch the briefcase. Better put your gun back in the flower box.

Standing behind him Jessup said, Sure. You're right. Then he reversed the submachine gun, got a good grip on it, raised it over his head, and slammed the steel butt into the back of the other man's skull.

Greenfield fell across the briefcase and rolled onto his back. Blood ran from his ears, and his eyes were open wide, unmoving, quite sightless. That's \$333,333.33 in the pocket, Jessup said.

The prisoners had seen the murder, and now they were suddenly restless. They writhed and kicked, struggled to free themselves. Relax, Jessup told them. I don't make anything from killing you people.

He put the submachine gun in the flower box and held the box under his left arm. He picked up the briefcase in his right hand. It was fairly heavy, but Jessup was a strong man. He went to the doors, opened one of them, sidled through, and let it close behind him.

The top clubhouse concourse was jammed with people chattering excitedly about the big race. The rail above the clubhouse restaurant was lined with anxious men, and the floor space around the clusters of television monitors was mobbed.

Jessup pushed his way through them and headed toward the down escalator.

Cooper

The blonde's name was Elsa Dorsey. She was twenty-nine years old, born in Macon and raised in Philadelphia. She had worked as a mutuel clerk at several racetracks before she met Arthur Hudson and persuaded him to turn his talents to ticket forgery. She had been married twice, divorced twice; and although Hudson thought that she really didn't enjoy sex herself, she was damned good at it.

When the call came through that Elsa had been apprehended as she was leaving her motel room with a shopping bag full of money, Henry Cooper shouted in triumph. He relinquished custody of Arthur Hudson and gave the schoolteacher to the state policemen who had come for him. Despite the long days and nearly sleepless nights he had put in this week, Cooper was at the top of his form. He could not stop whistling.

He went down to the fourth floor to spend the last few minutes of the day watching over Willie Denver and his fat friend. But when he got to the railing and looked down into the Oakview Room, he saw that their table was empty.

Post time, the track announcer said. The mutuel windows are closed. Intuitively, with that sixth sense that made a good cop, Cooper knew that something was wrong. The big race was about to start, and the fans were in their seats or at the rail to watch and cheer for their favorites. When he had come past the mutuel windows, Cooper had seen only a handful of bettors buying tickets. Denver and the fat man had not been among them. The money was down now; the windows were closed; the horses were moving into the gate; Denver and his pal should be at that table for which they must have tipped the maitre d' enough to support an Asian family for six months. Why should they leave just before the most important race of the day? It stank.

He felt something stir in the back of his mind, something that he should have taken notice of earlier in the day. He strained for it. Like a firefly fleeing from a boy with a jar, it eluded him.

All week, and especially today, you've had this forgery artist on your mind, Cooper told himself. You haven't thought about anything else. You've been blind to other developments. So what if the big trouble has nothing to do with Arthur Hudson? What if you've chased after Hudson while something worse was building up around you?

He knew that was exactly what had happened. The air felt charged the

way it was before a summer storm.

The firefly dipped and swirled and climbed and dived in the darkness at the back of his mind

and then he caught it!

Oh, my God, he said.

Since Teagarten's report Cooper had been thinking of Willie Denver as nothing more than a bookie's runner, for that was what made him an undesirable on any racetrack. But Teagarten had also said that Denver had been jailed twice for armed robbery. Abruptly, Cooper was certain that it was in this capacity, and not in his role as a bookie's runner, that Denver was to be feared.

But what in the name of God could they steal? A racetrack was tighter than a Swiss bank, especially this one with its Pro-Teck system for cash movement between windows and basement. In most tracks, the money was moved on carts along the concourses and down the freight elevators between each race. Not here. Here, it was drum tight. Did they plan to stick up a mutuel window? One lousy window? Take a couple of thousand dollars at a tremendous risk and run for it? Were they that desperate or stupid or small time?

He suddenly realized that he didn't even know if this Willie Denver had been sent to jail for nickel and dime holdups or for major crimes. They're in the gate, the track announcer said.

The roar of conversation dropped from a waterfall to a running faucet. The people in the restaurant sat up straight in their seats. The women nervously played with the mutuel tickets, and the men tapped their fingers or puffed on cigarettes or worked at their drinks.

No time, Cooper thought desperately. No time at all. If there's going to be a robbery of some sort, then it's either already happened or will happen any second now.

Fighting panic, he turned away from the railing and pressed back to the center of the concourse.

And thanks to all the uproar over the backstretch fire, I'm most likely the only agent on this level of the clubhouse. Maybe the only one in the whole damned building!

Jostled by the crowd around a group of closed circuit television screens, Cooper hesitated, not sure where or how or even if Willie Denver would strike. Briefly he wondered if he were being paranoid. And then he thought of the display room, the one million dollars in cash, and he knew that was it. He ran down the concourse, weaving between startled fans, and cried out when he saw the closed sign on the display room doors.

Eight

The Money

The electronic tote board was full of interesting numbers. In addition

to the time, temperature, odds, and pool totals for win, place, and show bets, it announced the highest payoff figure of the afternoon: \$2,340 for an Exacta combination in the sixth race. It listed the handle for the first eight races of the day: \$3,485,900. Below that figure was the handle for the ninth race, the Sweepstakes, in which the high rollers had rolled very high indeed: \$640,100.

By post time for the ninth race, the cash room contained nearly \$850,000 and the nine clubhouse row bosses were holding most of the \$640,100 which had been wagered on the last race.

Sherred

During the eighth race Annie Sherred had left the grandstand seat where she'd spent most of the afternoon. On her way toward the clubhouse stairs, she had taken the phony press badge which she had drawn according to Edgar's memory of what Century Oaks' press badges looked like out of her purse and pinned it to the right lapel of her pantsuit. The Melkins-Peterson guard on duty between the grandstand and clubhouse had smiled at her and admitted her to the upper levels without question.

On the fourth floor she had located the proper black door with its red-lettered no public admittance warning, and she had gone up to the fifth level as if she were on her way to the press box. Instead, she proceeded quickly to the tiny file room, where she closed the door and sat down to wait for post time in the ninth race.

At a quarter of six she stood next to the window and peered cautiously out at the racetrack. When she saw that the horses were in the starting gate and that the Sweepstakes had not, for whatever possible reason, been delayed, she stepped to the middle of the window to signal Savestio.

She kept expecting the door to open behind her.

It did not.

This signal was necessary so that Savestio would not reach the clubhouse roof too early. A helicopter swooping across the track and landing on the roof would not go uninvestigated for long. If he came much sooner than he was needed, the result would be as disastrous as if he had come too late.

When a full minute had passed, Annie turned away from the window and went to the door. She opened it a crack and recoiled as she saw two state policemen and a third man pass by in the hall. The man between the cops was clearly under arrest. He was small, slender and for a moment she thought that he was Willie. Had something gone wrong with the plan already? She eased open the door and leaned out to take a good look at their backs, and then she realized that this little man could not possibly be Willie Denver, for he was rather carelessly dressed in a rumpled, off-the-rack suit that did not quite fit him.

When the long hall was empty again, she went out of the file room and back down to the fourth level concourse. From there she took the escalator to the third floor and pushed through the milling racing fans. She passed between the turnstiles and left the building through the main clubhouse entrance.

She kept thinking that someone would shout at her and grab her from behind, and she walked with her shoulders hunched.

In the parking lot she saw Pat Jessup. He was two hundred feet away, hurrying through the shimmering snakes of super-heated air that rose off the macadam, hurrying toward a blue Chevrolet that he had stolen off a side street in Harrisburg only an hour before coming to the track. Vince Greenfield was apparently already in the car, for he was nowhere to be seen.

She went directly to her black Corvette, got behind the wheel, buckled up, and started the engine. Suddenly, she was shaking so badly that she didn't dare drive.

Savestio

Halfway down the ridge Dominick suddenly, vividly remembered that forest trail in Vietnam where the booby trap had exploded as he was stepping over it. Startled, he tripped and fell. He rolled through a loose tangle of briars, flailed helplessly, and cried out as the thorns gouged his bare arms and face. He grabbed at a clump of young mountain laurel. The leaves stripped away in his eager hands, coating his abraded fingers with a thin green juice. The slender branches bent and snapped. He came up hard against a boulder and struck his head on a limestone projection. Darkness loomed at the back of his mind. Struggling to his knees, he worked his hands into depressions on the boulder as if he were a mountaineer scaling a sheer rock face. He had trouble getting his breath; he felt as if there were a weight bearing down on his chest. He pulled himself up. When he regained his feet he took only half a dozen steps before he stumbled and fell again. Blood streamed down his face from a cut on his forehead. It lubricated his right eye and brought tears, fouled his mouth and made him gag. He was dizzy and wracked with pain. He didn't want to get up this time.

Two hundred acres, he thought.

He continued down the slope.

Garrison

Leroy Franson, the black accountant, said, But you can't cram all six of us into the vault!

Shut up and move, Garrison said irritably, prodding at the black man with the barrel of the Browning. We don't have time to tie up the lot of you. It's either the vault or a bullet in the head. Take your pick. There isn't enough air in there for six of us.

Of course there is.

We won't last fifteen minutes!

That's all the longer you'll need to last, Garrison said. This place is going to be crawling with cops in ten minutes, and they'll get you out in time.

The other four accounting department employees and Roy Aspin stood behind Franson as if they had elected him their spokesman, yet they were clearly surprised at his resistance. The black man said, I refuse. Surprised by his own brutality, Garrison cracked Franson under the chin with the barrel of the Browning. He saw the man spit blood, and he said, Move, damn you!

Edgar knew they had to expect the unexpected. Any operation as complex as this was certain to have its surprises, its unanticipated crises. Yet he had been profoundly unbalanced by the shooting and the death of the stranger who had come to the cash room with Roy Aspin. His nerves were tied in knots. He kept remembering how those bank robbers, sixteen years ago, had weathered just such a surprise. Reluctantly the accountant and the other five men crowded into the vault. They endured a snug fit.

Edgar swung the heavy door shut and spun the wheel lock. The vault was sealed.

They will be found in fifteen minutes, he told himself.

He went to the other end of the room where Willie had just finished loading bags of money into the two laundry carts. Are we ready?

Edgar asked.

By my watch it's just about post time, Velinski said. He was standing beside the three men who were bound and gagged on the floor, and he was holding a gun on two uniformed Melkins-Peterson men who had not been tied up but who had been relieved of their own weapons.

Into the hall, Velinski told the guards.

Sullenly they obeyed.

Willie and Edgar pushed the laundry carts out of the cash room and closed the door.

Be sure to wait for me, Velinski said.

Oh, Christ, Willie said with gruff affection, you got too much of the money for anyone to abandon you.

The fat man took one of the uniformed guards with him down to the west end elevator. The guard pushed the laundry cart.

Edgar and Willie followed their guard and their laundry cart to the east elevator. They passed the dead man on their way.

You think it's wise to leave him here? Garrison asked. If someone comes along . . .

But there's so much blood, you see, Willie said. If the body were hidden you'd still have the blood. No time to scour it away. So the

body might as well be left here too.

Edgar nodded.

You okay?

Fine.

After the Melkins-Peterson man boarded the lift with the money, Garrison followed him and got behind him. Willie remained in the hall. The row bosses were accustomed to a certain routine which called for one uniformed guard and one plainclothesman in the elevator. If they saw three men in the cage they might become suspicious. Therefore, when he reached the fifth floor, Edgar would leave the elevator and send it to the basement for Willie.

It's going sweet, Willie said, as if he sensed Garrison's uneasiness.

So far.

The lift doors slid shut, and they rode up to the first level. On the way Edgar said to the guard, I have my gun in my jacket pocket. I don't have to pull it to fire. I can shoot you in the spine before you get out two words.

Don't worry, the guard said. I'm not the type to play the hero. Besides, we'll get you in the end.

The doors opened.

A row boss was standing outside. He was a short, thickset man with receding hair and bushy sideburns. He smiled at them and tossed a gray sack full of money into the cart and handed a pink slip of paper to the uniformed guard. Evidently he had not been watching the floor indicator or, if he had been watching it, he had not realized they were going up instead of coming down on the collection route, their only break with routine. He scratched one of his sideburns and said, Hell of a handle this time. His voice didn't contain the slightest trace of suspicion.

The doors closed.

The elevator rose.

It was working.

But, Garrison thought, what about the other surprises that might be waiting above?

Franson

After a few seconds of silence in the dark vault, one of the men from the accounting department said, My God, Leroy, you're some fine actor.

Academy Award quality, someone else said.

Bought myself a split lip, Franson said, but I'm thinking it was worth it.

A fourth man said, It isn't going to be easy, considering how tight we're jammed in here. He grunted as someone moved and elbowed him in the stomach.

Roy Aspin nervously cleared his throat. His voice was shaky. Do you mind telling me what in the fuck you people are talking about? Squinting into the inkiness but unable to make out even the vaguest silhouette, Leroy Franson said, There's an in-house telephone in one of these drawers.

Jesus, which one? Aspin said.

I'm trying to figure, Franson said. But I'm a little bit claustrophobic and disoriented . . .

A rattling sound rose on his left, and another man said, I have it here, right beside my head.

Before he could respond, the phone was passed across the tiny chamber and shoved into Franson's groping hands. He lifted the receiver and waited for the track operator to come on the line. But all he heard was a steady buzzing noise. He clicked the buttons up and down, faster and faster, but he couldn't rouse her.

What's wrong? Aspin said.

That damned bitch! Franson said. There are so few calls to handle when the races are on that these operators sometimes sneak away from the switchboard to get a bite at one of the concessions stands. And she's sneaked away now? Aspin asked miserably.

Jiggling the buttons, listening to the buzzing line, Franson said, I'm afraid so.

A minute passed. Then another.

The walls and ceiling seemed to close in on them.

Still, the operator did not respond.

I'll kill her, Aspin said.

You'll have to wait your turn, Franson said.

Nine

Garrison

Edgar, the guard, and the laundry cart exited the east elevator into the aisle behind the mutuel windows in the Horsemen's Club on the fifth floor. Edgar sent the lift back down to the basement for Willie Denver. What's up? the row boss asked, curious about this deviation from routine.

Edgar showed him the Browning, because he knew there was no hope of fooling the man for long. Thirteen shots, he said coldly. And I'm good with it. That means there's one for you, one for each of your cashiers and sellers, and one for my friend here from Melkins-Peterson.

Why the row boss began.

You don't have to know why, Garrison said. Just make sure everybody keeps quiet for a couple of minutes. He glanced to his left, through the window in the row door. Everyone in the restaurant's looking at the track. Even the Pony Express Girls. As long as that's the case, no one

gets killed. He stared hard at the row boss. Understand? You want to be responsible for someone here getting killed?

The row boss was a dark, slender man with a mustache and a sharply trimmed goatee. He shook his head: no! The point of his beard acted as an exclamation point. He swallowed hard enough to be heard in another room.

The elevator came up behind Garrison, and Willie Denver got out of it. Two guns now, Edgar told the row boss and the Melkins-Peterson man and the eleven other mutual clerks who, by this time, had become aware of what was happening. Two guns. Twenty-six shots. They stared at him as if he were a cobra that had mesmerized them with his flared mantle. You have only two ways of getting out of this aisle: down the elevator to the basement, or through this door on my left into the restaurant. But in either case you've got to walk right over me. Don't try it. He kept talking to them, quietly saying the same thing over and over, for he knew that as long as they were listening to him they could not so easily think of a way to trick him.

A bell rang.

Edgar jumped.

They're off! the track announcer shouted.

Velinski

When they came out of the elevator at the west end of the fifth floor corridor, the Melkins-Peterson man went first, pushing the cart full of money. Velinski followed, ready to shoot him in the back if the guard made any wrong moves.

The potentially dangerous, hurried walk down the long corridor went so fast and so well that Velinski thought it seemed scripted, and he wondered who would have done the screenplay if this were a movie. Someone with a strong sense of pace. Herman Mankiewicz or Lillian Hellman? No, probably someone as talented but someone who did more action-filled scripts perhaps William Goldman or David S. Ward. Or Peter Stone?

Velinski kept his gun ready, but he had no need for it. They passed the deserted offices and storage rooms. It was Saturday, and in spite of Sweepstakes Day, no one worked on weekends in the secretarial and administrative staffs. The doors to the stewards' and the judges' chambers were open, but those gentlemen were watching the racetrack. Likewise, the reporters in the newsroom had their backs turned to the hall.

When they reached the door to the Horsemen's Club, they heard the track announcer cry: They're off!

No time to dawdle, Velinski told the stiff-necked Melkins-Peterson man.

They went into the Horsemen's Club. Except for the goggle-eyed

mutuel clerks who were covered by Edgar and Willie behind the windows on the left, no one in the restaurant was looking toward the back of the room. All eyes were riveted by the thoroughbreds that were running, at last, in the mile-and-a-quarter Century Oaks Sweepstakes.

When they had crossed two-thirds of the large room and reached the door at the east end of the Club's betting windows, Edgar came out into the restaurant and motioned Velinski's guard into the aisle behind the mutuel row. The man hesitated then obeyed quickly when Velinski threatened to shoot him in the ass.

And it's Moonlighter by a neck, Mike's Daughter on the rail, and Shadow Show moving up on the outside, the track announcer said with great enthusiasm.

Lou wheeled the laundry cart the rest of the way across the room and opened the door to the roof. Leaving Willie to cover the track employees behind the mutuel windows, Edgar helped Velinski lift the money-filled cart. They struggled with it to the top of the steps, through another door, and onto the clubhouse roof.

The helicopter wasn't there.

It will be, Edgar said.

Better be.

They ran back down the steps into the Horsemen's Club.

This is going to kill me, Velinski thought as he listened to his heart boom like background music to a jungle movie.

The track announcer was almost hysterical: Now it's Shadow Show taking the lead and Ironclad pushing for second! In the third slot it's a dead heat between Mike's Daughter and Moonlighter!

Rushing the second laundry cart to the steps, Edgar and Lou breathed deeply, lifted the cart high, and weaved from wall to wall of the stairwell on their way to the roof. They put it down beside the first cart.

Even up here on the roof the announcer's voice was audible: And it's Shadow Show, Shadow Show by a nose! It's Shadow Show!

Willie came up the steps at a run. Where's the goddamned chopper? He spun around, as if it were hiding behind him. All hell's gonna break loose in a minute!

Willie's last word was drowned out as the big machine roared in on them. The four wheels kissed the roof and then embraced it. The rotors beat the air with deafening force, and the down-draft was a fraction less fierce than that which would have blown them off their feet. The rescue bay door in the side of the Kaman Huskie slid open automatically.

Stooping to save their heads from the blades, Edgar and Velinski rolled the laundry carts to the wide bay door and heaved them one at

a time into the chopper.

Gasping for breath, his heart pumping like a piston in a racing engine, dizzy and terrified, Velinski thought: Christ, it's never like this in the movies! It's so easy in the movies!

Franson

The operator still had not returned to her switchboard.

Killing's too damned good for her, Roy Aspin said. We've got to torture her first.

As he seemed to have been doing for an eternity now, Franson jiggled the buttons on the phone.

Hello? a woman said.

Franson had waited for it so long that he didn't believe his ears.

Minerva?

What's going on here? the operator asked. Whoever's on this line, stop playing with your cut-off spikes.

Franson stopped playing with his cut-off spikes. He said, Minerva, this is Leroy Franson.

Oh, hi! she said brightly.

Minerva, put me straight through to the TRPB office on the backstretch and then you make a call to the state police and tell them we've

State police? Whatever for?

We're being robbed, Leroy said. And we

We're what?

Minerva, I'm locked in the cash room vault, Franson said. Three men have just taken the day's receipts and

Minerva giggled. Leroy, what kind of dumb bunny do you think I am? she giggled again.

Exasperated, driven near the edge of a screaming fit by his claustrophobia, Franson shouted: Minerva, you stupid bitch, open your ears and use your brain! This is no joke! We've been held up! Held up, held up, held up! Put me through to the TRPB fast, and then call the state troopers!

Well, there's no need to be rude, Minerva said huffily. I'm connecting you with the TRPB right now.

Cooper

When he found the dead man and the prisoners in the display room, Henry Cooper didn't bother to take any pulses or untie any hands. He ran out of there and down the concourse to the telephone behind the counter in the Saddle Bar. He picked it up and listened to the hum on the line, and he jiggled the buttons.

Minerva wasn't at her switchboard.

Shit!

Rather than waste ten minutes or even more waiting for her, Cooper

dropped the phone and left the Saddle Bar. Out on the concourse he stopped a Melkins-Peterson guard and told him about the mess in the display room. Then he hurried to the steps and went down to the first level of the clubhouse. He left the building by the employee entrance and dashed around the corner into the paddock where the teen-aged paddock attendant was sweeping horse manure into a hinged dustpan. And it's Moonlighter by a neck, Mike's Daughter on the rail, and Shadow Show moving up on the outside, the track announcer said. The paddock was that fenced corral-like section near the grandstand where horses were brought to wait twenty minutes before they raced. A well-lighted tunnel led from the paddock, underneath the track and the infield, and into the backstretch. The horses were brought to the paddock through the tunnel and, after the race, were returned to the backstretch by the same route.

Cooper's footsteps echoed like shotgun blasts in the tunnel and blanked out all but the loudest of the announcer's continuous chatter. When he came out on the backstretch near the TRPB offices, Cooper heard the announcer say: It's Shadow Show by a nose, Shadow Show! It's Shadow Show!

Flushed, sweating, breathing in great racking sobs, Cooper burst into the public room at the front of the TRPB building and saw a dozen agents rushing out of the back rooms. They were all either reaching for guns in their holsters or were checking the safeties on guns already in hand. One of them was Bud Teagarten, and Cooper grabbed him. But, there's been . . . robbery!

We know, Teagarten said.

About the display room? Cooper wheezed, unable to figure out who could have told them.

Display room? Teagarten wasn't tracking.

The million in cash. Gone.

Jesus! Teagarten said. They hit that too?

Too?

They knocked over the cash room in the basement, Teagarten said. And they probably hit all the major mutuel windows for the handle from the last race.

Cooper was stunned. You're talking about a couple of hundred pounds of moneyin maybe two dozen bank sacks. How in the name of God do they expect to get off the track with it?

In a helicopter, Teagarten said. A huge fucking helicopter came in across the backstretch and landed on the clubhouse roof a few seconds ago.

Fumbling for his own pistol, suddenly aware of the distant stutter of the aircraft's rotors, Cooper followed Teagarten outside.

Garrison

As soon as the carts of money were both securely in the chopper, Edgar climbed over the partition between the cargo hold and the flight deck. He settled into the copilot's seat and pulled on the safety harness.

Clean? Dominick Savestio shouted.

So far!

Then we're home free!

Savestio's head was gashed, and a sticky mask of blood was drying on his face. Blood was crusted in his laugh lines and in his sideburns.

What happened to you? Edgar asked.

Fell on the ridge. Almost blacked out.

Garrison winced.

I'm okay now.

You sure?

A little dizzy, Dominick shouted. It's nothing.

Looking back over the partition, Edgar saw Lou Velinski help Willie into the cargo hold. All aboard, he told Dominick. Close up and fly!

With a stomach-wrenching surge of power, the Kaman Huskie popped up into the spring sky. It swung around like a bumblebee riding the air currents near a flower, hovered for a second, then chattered off across the racetrack, over the infield toward the stately line of oak trees.

Two million? Savestio asked.

Easy! Garrison shouted.

Clean?

You already asked.

I did? Savestio wiped one hand across his eyes, his fingers came away glistening with blood.

When they topped the oaks and started over the back-stretch, at least a dozen men opened fire on them with handguns.

Idiots! Savestio said. If they hit us right, we'll crash into the horse barns!

Bullets clanged off the metal hull and cracked loudly against the inch-thick Plexiglas of the pilot's bubble. The Plexiglas chipped directly in front of Edgar's chest, but it didn't crack. Other shots slammed into the undercarriage.

Savestio took the chopper up another hundred feet. He picked up air speed as they left the backstretch and soared toward the top of the ridge, the woods, and the clearing beyond where the Mazda was waiting.

Garrison held tightly to the edge of his seat. They were flying with the craft's nose tilted sharply down, and the sensational view nauseated him. He hardly breathed as the forest flashed past under them and then he suddenly took a very deep breath indeed as the helicopter angled

sharply down toward the trees. He glanced at Savestio and saw that the pilot had collapsed over the controls and was lolling like a helpless drunkard at the wheel of a runaway automobile.

The fall on the ridge. The goddamned fall on the ridge! Edgar thought bitterly. Another goddamned surprise. A simple little fall on the ridge . . . to be tripped up by that after we've come through so much. . . . It isn't fair!

He leaned sideways as far as the safety harness would allow, and he grabbed Savestio by the shoulder. He shook him and shouted at him. The pilot was unconscious.

Droning mournfully, the Kaman Huskie glided down, down, skimming the tops of the trees.

The clearing appeared ahead.

So close, Edgar thought.

Behind him, Willie shouted something unintelligible.

Dominick! Garrison said urgently.

Savestio hung limply in his harness.

Controls! Willie shouted, thrusting his head over the partition that separated the cabin from the cargo hold. His upper lip was badly cut, and his teeth were bloody. Got to get to the damned controls!

I can't fly it! Edgar said.

At the perimeter of the clearing, the helicopter's fixed wheels were snared by the highest branches of the trees. The piercing shriek of tortured steel and the gunshot reports of rivets splitting head from shaft filled the cabin. They bounced and pitched as if they had suddenly been transported from an aircraft into the rollicking command deck of a Sherman tank. The copter turned a somersault in midair and then it was over the center of the clearing, a hundred feet above the earth, standing on its tail like a moon ship leaving the launching pad.

Garrison saw the sky, nothing but the sky, on all sides.

Out, got to get out, now, out . . .

Irrational in the face of death, desperate to escape its wide mouth, he tried to unbuckle his safety harness. He would just slip out of the harness, open the door, and get out before it crashed. Yes. Of course. Why hadn't he thought of that before? If he could just release the damned harness!

And then the ground came up underneath, and the tail section of the big craft telescoped in toward the flight deck. The rotors tore loose. The world was nothing but deadly noise.

Killigan

When he came off the escalator onto the top clubhouse concourse, minutes after the running of the Century Oaks Sweepstakes, Killigan was caught up in an angry mob. Hundreds of fans, men and women

alike, had laid a rowdy siege to the cashiers' windows. They were waving mutuel tickets, shouting, cursing, gesticulating, and arguing with the ashen-faced Melkins-Peterson guards who obviously could not control them without resorting to violence. Violence was unthinkable. But it was in the air. Killigan had never seen anything like it on a racetrack. Thoroughbred racing enthusiasts were the best behaved, least destructive fans in all of professional sports. Except now. Except here. Except today, when they seemed to have gone crazy.

Killigan forced his way across the concourse and went up the steps to the fifth floor. At the door to his office, he collided with Roy Aspin. What's going on here?

Where in the hell have you been? Aspin asked breathlessly. Everything's a shambles. I just got out of the vault. They had me locked in the vault! And now there's no money to pay the winners. There's going to be a full-scale riot here!

Killigan gripped Aspin's shoulder. He was still weak from the drugs, and his grip was not firm; but it was firm enough to make Roy shut up. You're not making sense. Slow down. Tell me.

Aspin told him, starting with the three men who'd taken over the cash room, jumping back to the back-stretch fire, speaking so rapidly that his words fell one over the other.

By the time he had slumped in his chair behind the Steinway desk, Killigan understood the nature of the crisis. He was in the middle of a disaster greater than any he had imagined while in the deepest troughs of drug depression.

What are you going to do? Aspin asked.

Without answering him, Killigan picked up the telephone and put a call through to the kitchen manager for the Harry M. Stevens Company. Peter, how much wine do you have?

What sort of wine? the kitchen manager asked.

All kinds. Wine, period.

A thousand bottles. Maybe eleven hundred.

That'll be enough.

For what?

Break out every bottle of wine you have. Get your waiters off their duffs. Let's throw a free wine party for all the customers still in the building.

Peter was astonished. Free?

We've got maybe three thousand winners waiting to cash tickets on the last race. But we don't have any money to pay them with right now. So let's avoid a riot, huh? Let's keep them happy until I can get some cash in here. As soon as I hang up, I'm calling the Saddle Bar and ordering it to open for free drinks. Between that and the wine,

maybe we can calm them down.

The track will reimburse us, I suppose.

Including handsome tips for every one of your waiters, Killigan said.

Now will you move ass?

Moving now, Peter said.

Killigan hung up. His hands were shaking. Droplets of cold sweat, like an endless procession of centipedes, trickled down his spine and between his buttocks.

Hell of an idea, Aspin said admiringly. I'll go down and see that our guests get the word. Free liquor! That ought to make the waiting a whole lot easier. He hurried out of the room, smiling at the floor as he went.

After he had talked to the manager of the Saddle Bar, Killigan put through a call to the home of the president of the Harrisburg bank with which Century Oaks did business. Although it was Saturday evening and the bank was closed, Killigan managed to secure the banker's promise that a half million dollars in cash would be rounded up and shipped to Century Oaks within the next hour and a half.

Killigan had just hung up on the banker when a Pennsylvania state police officer tall, clean-cut, rugged-looking, his broad chin creased by the strap from his soup-dish-like helmet came in to get the details. He spoke calmly but quickly. We'll need descriptions to put on the wire, he said when he discovered who Killigan was.

You don't want me, Killigan said. He gave directions to the display room and to the cash room in the basement. There are men both places who saw these guys. They can give you what you want.

Thank you, sir, the trooper said. He, and another cop who had come in behind him, turned to leave.

Wait a minute, Killigan said.

They looked back at him.

What's being done now?

It's only fifteen minutes since we got the robbery report, the trooper said defensively. We'll have state choppers in the air in fifteen or twenty more minutes. And in ten minutes I can have their descriptions on the wire.

I see.

They won't get away.

Sure, Killigan said.

They left.

Aspin came up from downstairs to report on the reactions of the guests to the delay in obtaining their winnings. It's amazing, he said. The wine and liquor are doing it. And the news of the robbery. Big excitement and booze. Perfect combination. Twenty minutes ago we were on the brink of a riot. Now the clubhouse is as festive as ever I've

seen it. And the grandstand's even better. He shook his head. Jack, you're pulling it all together. You're going to save Century Oaks single-handedly.

Killigan smiled weakly.

You are!

I guess I am. But he knew that no matter how well he weathered these crises, he had lost Century Oaks, at least for himself.

Garrison

He was not hurt. When the rear sections of the Kaman Huskie telescoped on impact, the front cabin buckled slightly but didn't collapse. Slowly, almost gracefully, the helicopter toppled onto its side and was still at last. The pilot's bubble, thick enough to withstand small arms fire and the other pressures of combat operations, hadn't been smashed; there was no disastrous shower of Plexi-glas shards. The only danger now was fire. The wreckage reeked of gasoline, the ruined craft might explode at any moment. He hadn't been hurt yet; but he couldn't expect his luck to hold much longer.

Edgar? The voice was familiar yet alien: thin, weak, from a throat choked with blood. It came from the cargo hold directly behind Garrison.

Willie? That you?

Willie coughed, cleared his throat, spat with some difficulty.

You okay? Garrison asked.

Can't move . . . hurt pretty . . . bad.

Edgar struggled with his harness, too close to panic to function well, frustrated much as a small child would be when trying to make his first cat's cradle with a piece of string. Just hold on.

Can't . . . afraid can't . . .

Yes, you can.

Real bad . . . lot of blood . . .

Dammit, hold on! Fight it! Garrison knew he was screaming and that he was irrational, but he couldn't control himself. They had the money yet everything had gone wrong.

And now this goddamned stubborn harness had him trapped. He was lying in the copilot's seat. The earth was on his right side, tight up against that door. On his left, suspended above him in the overturned chopper, was Dominick Savestio and the only door to escape. If he could get out of this harness, he could climb up there, squeeze past the unconscious Savestio, get the door open, wrestle Dominick and then Willie out into the clearing before the gasoline went up. But the harness was jammed.

Lou's dead, Willie told him.

No. Can't be.

Willie produced a sour, humorless laugh that skirted the edge of

hysteria. Oh, yes he can. Real dead. He took a . . . steel rod . . . through the chest.

Edgar's low spirits sank even lower. In pursuit of fortune, everyone around him was finding death instead. And any of them might have been Edgar himself. Or he might die next. He said, Just hold on. Will you do that for me, Willie? Don't give up, okay? Willie?

Silence.

Willie, damn you!

The stench of gasoline was almost unbearable now. The fumes made Edgar's eyes water and filled his mouth with an acrid taste. He was having trouble getting his breath.

Suddenly the interlocking halves of the harness buckle parted. He was free.

He struggled out of his seat and clambered up the cabin floor. He got a grip on Savestio's chair and muscled himself around behind it where he leaned against the waist-high cargo-hold partitions; his palms and the toes of his shoes were pressed firmly against the back of the pilot's seat. If he relaxed he would fall down where he had come from, and he would surely break an arm or knock himself cold.

Savestio mumbled and coughed.

Dominick?

But the pilot had already drifted back into his coma.

Gasping for air and getting mostly gasoline fumes, Garrison quickly became dizzy and weak. His vision blurred. He had to get the hell out of here within the next few seconds, or he was going to pass out. And once he fainted he would never wake up again. He would die in here, either of suffocation or immolation.

Nice choice, he thought bitterly.

He squeezed past Savestio and wedged himself into the narrow space between the pilot's chair and the door. He found the port release handle and pressed it down. He shoved hard on the door.

It wouldn't budge.

Maybe the frame was twisted.

Or the latch smashed?

Jesus, no!

His lungs felt hot. His eyes were burning. He was beginning to wonder if he shouldn't just give up, lie there and sleep, relax . . .

He put his shoulder to the door and strained until he could feel the veins and arteries bulging at his temples. Insanely, he thought of how the blood vessels raised up in bas relief on a horse that had just run a fast race. He was coughing and sobbing and muttering senselessly. Tears streamed down his cheeks. The door held, held, held as if it were welded in place and then abruptly flew open with a hideous squealing and grating of jagged metal fragments.

Sparks! he thought.

But the friction did not cause an explosion.

He pulled himself out of the cabin and sprawled on the side of the Kaman Huskie. The country air was as sweet as cow's milk taken from the pail.

Two minutes later, when he was pretty much recovered, he set about getting Savestio out of the wrecked aircraft. A smaller man than Garrison could not have managed it; but inside of five minutes Edgar had the pilot stretched out on the back seat of the Mazda.

The helicopter was still not afire.

Garrison went back to it. He climbed up to the door, hesitated only an instant, then went down into the cabin. The odor of gasoline was still strong, but the fresh air pouring through the open door kept it from being as deadly as it had been a few minutes ago. He crossed over the partition into the cargo hold and knelt beside Willie Denver.

The little man looked like a rag doll with most of the stuffing beaten out of it. He was lying on what should have been a side wall of the aircraft but which was now the floor. Willie was trapped under part of the chopper's superstructure which had crashed down through the roof of the rescue bay. His legs were nearly severed from his body trunk. He had bled a great deal. He had not bled to death solely because the weight of the steel that crossed his thighs acted as a tourniquet on the wound it had caused.

Willie? Garrison said softly.

His eyes fluttered open.

I'm going to get you out of here.

Hard to . . . breathe.

It's the gas fumes.

More than . . . that.

You just hold on.

Can't be . . . can't be moved.

Nonsense.

Willie coughed, and a thick stream of dark blood dribbled from between his pale lips.

Garrison began to examine the collapsed steel work to see if there was any way he could get enough leverage to move it.

Listen! Willie insisted in a hoarse whisper. Listen to Willie.

Garrison looked at him.

Leave a person be. Will you? Willie's finished. You stay here . . . you'll get nabbed. Cops. Must be coming. Whole thing might go up . . . in flames any second now. His white face was dotted with jewel-like beads of sweat.

Willie, I don't want to leave you. How can I?

Fury replaced the pain in the little man's face. You got to get away . . .

with the money. Got to! For the first time . . . first time in his nothing life . . . Willie Denver was part of . . . something big. One of the biggest! They'll be talking for years . . . about that shrimp Denver . . . that little spic who changed his name . . . that nothing little bastard who . . . was in on a big one. For years! You can't . . . let it fall through. That's not fair to me. What good is it . . . being in on one . . . of the biggest fucking failures . . . of all time? Someone has to get off with the money. Someone. Anyone. You can't . . . can't take this away from Willie. He finally made it. You can't take it . . . from him. Can't! Willie, I

You got Annie, Willie said. His tongue was a scarlet ribbon. Beautiful. She's great. Don't she mean . . . anything to you? Move your ass. Get the . . . get the money out. And you get out. Get back . . . to Annie. He tried to smile but winced instead. And you . . . tell Annie how . . . well . . . Willie kind of loved her. Oh, Christ! He coughed and spat. Tell her . . . I kind of loved her. Okay?

Edgar nodded. Okay, Willie.

You'll tell her . . . how I said it? I didn't say . . . Willie loved her. I said . . . I loved her. I loved her.

I understand, Willie, Garrison said gently.

I did make it. Finally made it. I am somebody.

You are,

Promise you'll have fun.

I'll sure try, Willie.

Promise! You got to . . . have fun. Got to enjoy . . . the money. Money was the . . . whole point. Otherwise . . . it's a failure . . . a great big . . . zero. Got me?

Got you.

Willie sighed. The sigh became a vomitous retching noise. He shuddered, and the blood gushed from his nostrils. He closed his eyes and kept them closed.

Feeling a commitment to the dead man as well as to Annie and himself, Garrison gathered up the heavy canvas bank sacks that were strewn throughout the badly damaged cargo hold. Two of them were weighted down by Lou Velinski's corpse, and prying them loose from the fat man was one of the most unpleasant chores of Edgar's life. He got all the bags into the main cabin. Then he heaved them one at a time through the open door overhead. Several of them fell back inside and had to be thrown a second time. However, arms aching, he was soon finished.

He need only two or three minutes to load the money into the Mazda. He was ready to leave.

As an afterthought he fished a packet of ten-dollar bills from one of the bank bags and used the Mazda's cigarette lighter to set fire to one

end of the money. When the bills were burning well, he turned and gently lofted them into the ruined helicopter. The spilled gasoline went up with a whoosh!

Now, if the police located the helicopter, they wouldn't be able to get into it until it cooled. Until they learned differently, they might think all the thieves had died in the crash.

Edgar tossed his suit jacket into the car, took off his tie, and opened the neck of his shirt. He got into the Mazda and closed the door.

Cooper

Breathing only slightly faster than normal despite the long run, Henry Cooper gained the top of the ridge which lay behind the Century Oaks backstretch. He entered the woods and stopped to give the other four men a chance to catch up with him.

Come on! Hurry! he shouted down to them.

Already, too much time had been wasted. He had been certain from the start that the helicopter had put down nearby, somewhere in the forest. The pilot had been handling it poorly. The machine had pitched and yawed as it approached the crest of the ridge, and it had skimmed the trees too close for comfort. Maybe one of the TRPB men had put a lucky shot through the Plexiglas pilot's bubble. Whatever the case, his policeman's instinct told him the chopper was down. However, he'd wasted at least five minutes trying to convince the others that this was true. The moment the aircraft had disappeared over the trees, their confidence had evaporated. And even when he did manage to persuade four of them to come with him, more precious time was wasted convincing Oscar Fletcher, their boss, to let them follow in hot pursuit where they had no jurisdiction as law officers. Then, dammit, they'd had trouble getting rifles and ammunition from the locked gun case in the TRPB headquarters; no one had been able to find the key and Cooper had finally smashed in the glass front. Once they'd loaded the guns and made the long run to the top of the ridge, so much time had passed that Cooper wondered if the pursuit was any longer worthwhile.

Bud Teagarten and three other agents staggered up the slope and into the shadowy, birch-framed clearing.

A minute to catch your breath, Cooper said. Not a second longer. When we move out, we put twenty or thirty foot between one man and the next. Go down the ridge in a straight line. Don't worry about a thorough search until we reach the bottom land. They won't have parked that chopper on a slope. There's going to be lots of woods to search once we get down there, but maybe we'll be lucky. It's about time for some luck.

Too true, Teagarten said.

Everbody ready? Cooper asked.

They were ready.

Garrison

In the car he picked up a man's brown wig that was lying on the passenger's seat and carefully worked it onto his shaved head. He had already thrown away the horn-rimmed glasses. A new man, he belted up, started the engine, and drove out of the clearing just as one of the helicopter's unruptured auxiliary fuel tanks exploded like a two-hundred-pound bomb.

As he had done six days ago, Garrison pushed the Mazda to its limits. He knew there would be state police choppers in the air soon, and he wanted to be out of the area before they became a serious threat. He made all the sudden turns on two wheels. He slammed across the wet-weather ruts and barreled recklessly between the elms, birches, and scraggly pines that left barely enough road for him to drive upon.

He came to the top of the wooded hill on which he'd had some trouble last Sunday. He started down the half-mile grade toward the muddy stretch of flat ground that lay at the bottom, toward the dark tunnel of pine boughs that waited for him beyond the mud. It was all familiar, like a grand prix circuit to a veteran driver. He didn't find the track treacherous at all this time. It was a piece of cake. Or it would have been a piece of cake if Pat Jessup hadn't been blocking the way.

Annie had been right: Jessup was not a man to be trusted when there was so much money involved.

You've made a mistake, Garrison said, as if Jessup could hear him. You really have.

In the back seat Savestio moaned.

If you can hear me, Garrison shouted to the wounded pilot, brace yourself.

Cooper

They were three-quarters of the way down the ridge when the explosion thundered through the trees and echoed beneath the canopy of tightly laced branches. Everyone but Cooper stopped dead. One man dropped to his knees and brought up his rifle and tried to find something to blow apart.

Looking back at them, Cooper said, Come on, for God's sake! They aren't tossing bombs at you.

Not a minute later they reached the clearing and cautiously circled the burning helicopter.

You were right! Teagarten shouted over the hiss and roar of the flames. You think they're inside?

Before Cooper could answer him, machine-gun fire crackled around them. They all went flat, hugged the earth, and crawled frantically for cover.

Glancing around at the trees, taking a moment to regain his wits,

Cooper said, That wasn't close. Maybe a mile away. And it wasn't directed at us.

You think they're shooting each other? Teagarten asked. A falling out among thieves?

Cooper nodded. Could be. Where did it seem to come from, do you think?

East, Teagarten said without hesitation.

I thought so too, Cooper said. He raised his rifle and pointed to the east end of the clearing. See the brush over there? Look to you like a car went through there recently?

Yeah. You're right.

Cooper got to his feet. If they're gunning each other, they aren't in a car now. Let's go see what they're up to.

Garrison

Halfway along the stretch of muddy road at the bottom of the grade, Jessup had angled the stolen Chevrolet across the narrow right of way. He was standing fifty feet away from it, the submachine gun held in both hands, as if he were guarding the Chevy from Garrison.

Braking repeatedly as he descended the hill, Edgar brought the Mazda down to five miles an hour when he reached the flat ground. He drifted slowly forward, straight toward Jessup.

Jessup was grinning. He stepped out of the middle of the road and stood on the right-hand shoulder, giving Garrison plenty of room to stop. He apparently thought that Garrison was going to just pull up and surrender his share of the take.

Maybe I would have once. Not now. You made a mistake, Pat. Oh, brother, have you made a mistake!

That was precisely what Edgar wanted the bastard to think. When Jessup, much too sure of himself, lowered the gun an inch or two, Garrison stamped down on the accelerator and swung the Mazda in Jessup's direction.

The ruby ring glinted with refracted sunlight as the brown man jerked the gun up again. He was fast. But not fast enough. The Mazda caught his right hip, lifted him off the ground, and tossed him away into the brush.

Edgar stopped the car and got out.

He found the Belgian machine gun and then found Jessup. The brown man's hip was crushed, and his leg was broken in several places.

White bone tipped with blood, poked through his torn trousers. He was conscious. But the pain was so bad that the grinding of his teeth was audible several feet away.

What the hell? Jessup asked when Garrison came to stand over him. His face was disfigured with pain and confusion.

A cicada cried shrilly in the brush nearby.

You really should have shot up the car when I was coming down the hill. But I suppose that wouldn't have been enough fun. You wanted to see my face when you killed me. You're that type.

I wasn't . . . going to shoot you!

Yes. And then what would you have done to Annie? You'd have gone out to the farm. Raped her. Beat her up maybe. Then you'd have killed her too. I guess you've always been the way you are. Edgar gazed down at Jessup as if the man were an animal in a trap, an unusual and loathsome species. Even when you were a kid you must have been the same. Capable of anything. Something in your genes maybe. Or just something left out of you, some vital part.

For Christ's sake, help me! Jessup said, pawing uselessly at his shattered leg.

Because you never changed, Edgar said, you probably think no one else ever changes either. You can't conceive of it. To you, a man is what he is and he'll never be anything else.

Jessup tried to get up by himself. He couldn't do it. He fell back into a puddle of thick mud.

When you first met me, Garrison said, I was a nice guy who let the world walk over him. Harmless fellow. You thought that's what I still was, down deep. So you stood there in the road and trusted me. But I changed.

I wanted the money, and I changed to get it. I just hope, now that I've got it, I can change part way back to what I was.

Jessup reached up with his right hand. We're buddies. Buddies! We pulled a job together.

Where's Greenfield?

Jessup looked blank.

Dead?

Dead? Of course not! No!

Sorry, Garrison said. I can't do it. I can't trust you. Whenever you're better you'll come after me. You don't change, remember. You're a constant. If the cops nail you, you'll spill your guts to get a reduced sentence. No. I have the money and now I have a banker's good business sense. I'm sorry. I really am. He brought up the machine gun and used it on Pat Jessup.

The tatatatatatatat silenced the cicada.

Cooper

Trying not to look at the dead man's face, trying not to get blood on his hands, Henry Cooper was going through the pockets in the brown suit when Teagarten knelt beside him. Teagarten and the other three men had been searching the Chevrolet that someone had backed into the roadside drainage ditch. He didn't look happy.

Well? Cooper asked.

No money.

Didn't think there would be.

Unless maybe they pulled out the seats and put the cash in the body recess and then popped the seats back in place.

Didn't have time.

I guess they didn't, Teagarten said, crestfallen.

They both stood up and listened to the cicada for a moment.

Then Cooper sighed and said, Well, that's it. One or more of them got away with it.

For now, Teagarten said. State cops'll get them.

I don't think so, Cooper said. They had all the bad luck that's coming their way. We had our chance. If we'd been a couple of minutes faster we'd have got them. But we blew it.

Well . . . I hate to admit it. But maybe you're right.

I know I am, Cooper said. Instinct. Never fails me.

Teagarten looked at the corpse, frowned, and turned his back on it.

Well, no matter who else goes down the tube, you're going to come up smelling like roses.

How do you figure?

Easy, Teagarten said. You were the one who nailed the forgery artist. You were the one who spotted that Willie Denver. You were the one who discovered the display room robbery. You were the one who insisted the chopper had come down in the woods. Hell . . . home office's going to take notice. Meanwhile, Oscar Fletcher somehow let an arsonist get on his backstretch. He pulled the agents out of the clubhouse just when they might have interfered with a robbery. And He couldn't have known there was going to be a robbery, Cooper said. Let's be fair.

The home office won't care whether or not he could have known. They'll just look at what he did and at what happened and judge him by that. Besides, when you wanted to come out here to the woods, he's the one who delayed you. He reached out and pulled off the top of a milkweed plant that was left over from last summer. You're going to be pushed up to the top spot at Century Oaks. I'll lay you money at a hundred-to-one.

You're crazy, Cooper said. They won't can Fletcher.

He's about retirement age. They'll retire him.

Cooper listened to an owl that had begun to hoot far back in the trees.

Finally he laughed and said, You know, maybe you're right.

You'd rather have that promotion than the couple million bucks these crooks got away with, wouldn't you? Teagarten asked.

Sure.

You're something.

I'm just a cop. I like it, Cooper said. Money isn't the only thing I get

paid. There's other currencies, you know.

Epilogue

Sweepstake Day

Rita was waiting for him when he came home from the racetrack at ten o'clock that night. She had set two places at the breakfast nook in the kitchen, and two tall candles provided the only light. When they got hungry there were baked potatoes in the oven and two one-pound steaks ready to be thrown on the broiler. She led him to the nook and made him sit down, and she kissed him chastely on the forehead.

I'll get you a drink, she said.

No, he said. I don't want one.

Nonsense. She brought him a bourbon on the rocks.

He let it sit on the table in front of him.

Well, she said, I hear there was a lot of excitement at the track today.

She knelt on the floor beside him and took his hands in hers. Tell me all about it,

I've lost Century Oaks.

That's silly.

It's true.

Who said?

Nobody yet.

You see!

Tomorrow, though.

Nobody's going to throw you out on your ear, she said. Or on your ass, either. I'll talk to Daddy about it. Now drink your bourbon like a good little boy.

He looked away from her and watched the guttering candle flame.

Sometime last night, I don't know just when, I learned something about myself. Not something pretty. I'm an emotional cripple. You know the only thing that gives me joy in life? Money. Managing money for myself and for others, manipulating people with money, letting myself be manipulated by it. I'm a hell of a businessman. I'm a whiz! Agroco, Zuverbeck, the way I handled that mob scene this evening. . . . But I can't control my own emotions. And when my private life spills over into business . . .

Oh, dear, she said. I can't stand deep, introspective men. She was wearing a long, sheer, white negligee which he had never seen before. Now, she slid into the booth with him and lifted one of his hands and placed it on her breasts, which swung loose and full beneath the gossamer robe. Her nipples were swollen and stiff. I like romantic men, she said.

If I lose Century Oaks, I lose my last chance at a big money job, a job with power. I'll never again be able to do what I like to do most.

With one quick hand she unzipped his fly, reached inside his trousers,

and found him. Her ringers found the most sensitive spot and teased it with soft expertise.

Rita, no. Not tonight.

Bullshit, she said in that familiar nasty tone. I know you better than you know yourself.

Although he stiffened in her hand, he felt as much disgust as desire. You know what you like more than money, more than wheeling and dealing and being a whiz?

He wanted to reach down and take hold of her hand and pull it out of his trousers. Instead, he leaned back and sighed as she took his penis out through the open fly and began to stroke it. He hated himself. Nevertheless, he watched her graceful ringers as they performed their obscene massage.

You like to hate yourself, she said. More than you like your job. More than you like money. If you ever had to stop hating yourself, darling, you'd go mad.

That isn't . . . isn't true.

Of course it's true, she said. And what you better realize is that you could end up losing both Century Oaks and me. And then what in the hell would you do?

He looked at her, and he saw, beneath her magnificent beauty, that well-known corruption scintillating like a naked corpse floating just beneath the surface of a moon-dappled lake.

I can do without you, he said.

She laughed.

It was funny, he decided. Grimly funny.

She let go of his erection and picked up his whiskey glass. She held the bourbon to his lips. Drink up, baby. Then I'll get you another one. Then we'll go outside on the lawn, in the dew, and fuck like bunny rabbits.

Sighing, he took the glass from her hand and drained it.

June 10

Dominick emptied the million dollars from the briefcase onto the top of the scarred desk. It made an impressive pile.

Holy shit! Barry St. Cyr said. He went out to the kitchen to get a six-pack of beer. When he came back he just stood and stared at the money.

Savestio took a Budweiser from the pack and popped it open. You think you can fence it at say fifty percent face value?

St. Cyr nodded.

Okay, we'll split down the middle.

No.

That's the only way.

You can't get it through your dumb honky head that you don't owe me

anything. I owe you.

Dominick drank some beer. Things have changed, Barry. I appreciate what you've done for me. But I can't let you keep on helpin' me out. It's no good like that. Now that I got this money, I can buy my own way. And this is only part of what I got out of the racetrack job. The split was only three ways. I got a couple of hundred thousand besides this. And if I can buy my own way for a changewell, I'm a little bit of a man again. Even without . . . without women, I'm a little bit of a man if I can pay my own way. You get it?

St. Cyr stared at him for a long moment, then smiled.

Yeah. I get it, Dom.

Fifty-fifty?

I accept.

September 15

The horse arrived in a special van at two o'clock that afternoon. It was a handsome black two-year-old male with a triangular white marking on its nose. It had been sired by a descendant of Bold Ruler and was foaled out of Narragansett, a mare with excellent bloodlines. At auction two weeks ago, it had brought fifty thousand dollars. And now it was the crown jewel of the Garrison Stables at Hollywook Park, California.

Edgar and Annie spent almost three hours with the animal that afternoon. They rubbed it down, put it through an easy workout, and fed it more sugar cubes than they should have done.

What will we call it? she asked.

Well, considering how he's flirting with you to get those bits of sugarhow about Annie's Beau?

Or Edgar's Rival.

He winced.

I really do have a name, she said. But it's kind of sentimental. Maybe you won't like it.

Let's hear.

Willie's Memory.

His smile froze for an instant, then thawed. Okay, but with no tears. Willie brought us money. This Willie is going to win races and bring us a lot of money too. It's appropriate. And it's better than a granite memorial.

At five o'clock they went home to the sixteen-room hillside house where the caterers were already putting up the tables for the party which Willie's Memory had inspired. By eight, the guests were arriving in two's and four's. The wine flowed. The food was only a little short of exquisite. And when the last guest was gone at three in the morning, Edgar and Annie went skinny-dipping in the huge heated pool that was the focal point of their U-shaped flagstone house.

Holding her in the water, kissing her wet breasts and and then pressing his face into her shining auburn hair, Edgar said, You know that old saying?
What old saying?
'Money can't buy happiness.'
She kissed him lightly on the lips and put her arms around him, bobbled in the water. What about it?
It's bullshit, Edgar said.
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sH

Dj'[1]?'[1]'[1]'[1] '[1]'[1] '[1]-([1]/([1]))([1]([1]([1]([1]) [1]) [1]) [1]) [1]) [1]) [1] = * [1] @ * [1] \ * [1] ^ * [1] { * [1] } * [1] S + [1] T
+ [1] u + [1] z + [1] + [1] + [1] + [1] + [1] + [1] + [1] + [1] - [1] - [1] 3 -
[1] 5 - [1] J - [1] L - [1] - [1] - [1]

. [1]. [1]. [1]. [1] . [1]. [1]. [1]. [1] g/[1] i/[1] y/[1] {/[1]/
[1]/[1]/[1]/[1]/[1] / [1]/[1] / [1] o0 [1] q0 [1] 0 [1] 0 [1] 0 [1]
0 [1] + 2 [1] I2 [1] 2 [1] 2 [1] 2 [1] 2 [1] 2 [1] 2 [1] 3 [1]
"hXl'hXl'6CJ]aJmH

sH

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hXl'hXl'CJaJmH

sH

N- [1] - [1] @ . [1] } . [1]. [1] i/[1] z/[1]/[1] 0 [1] + 2 [1]

[2[1]2[1]2[1]3[1]&3[1>`3[1]3[1]3[1] 3[1]3[1]
3[1]G4[1]5[1];6[1]c6[1]j6[1]6[1]P8[1]b8[1]

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gdM??3[1]

3[1]3[1]3[1]\$3[1]'3[1]^3[1]a3[1]}3[1]3[1]3[1]3[1]3[1]
3[1]3[1] 3[1]3[1] 3[1]4[1]4[1]E4[1]G4[1]5[1] 5[1]5[1]
5[1]:6[1] < 6[1]G6[1]I6[1]b6[1]d6[1]h6[1]k6[1]6[1]6[1]6[1]6[1]
(8[1]*8[1].8[1]08[1];8[1] = 8[1]N8[1]Q8[1>`8[1]c8[1]h8[1]k8[1]
8[1]9[1]

9[1]9[1]9[1]9[1]-9[1] 9[1]m9[1]o9[1]p:[1]r:[1]:[1]:[1]:
[1] "hXl'hXl'6??CJ]aJmH

sH

h > CJaJmH

sH

hXl'hXl'CJaJmH

sH

hXl'CJaJmH

sH

Ib8[1]j8[1]8[1]8[1]??8[1]8[1]?:[1]:[1]];[1] ;[1] < [1] < [1]
< [1] = [1] = = [1]d = [1]
> [1] > [1]?[1]?[1]
?[1]?[1] ?[1]6A[1]JB[1]/C[1]F[1]

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< [1] = [1] = [1]; = [1] > = [1]D = [1]F = [1] > [1]?[1]?[1]
?[1] A[1]A[1]D[1] D[1]~I[1]I[1]I[1] I[1]J[1]pJ[1]qJ[1]K[1]}
M[1]~M[1]M[1] M[1]P[1] ?? ? v v h> CJaJmH

sH

h> hXl'CJ0aJ0mH

sH

(h> hXl'56CJ0\]aJ0mH

sH

"h> 56CJ\??]aJmH

sH

"hXl'hXl'6CJ]aJmH

sH

h(CJaJmH

sH

hXl'CJaJmH

sH

hXl'hXl'CJaJmH

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hXl'6CJ]?aJmH

sH

.F[1]I[1]I[1]K[1]cN[1]?
N[1]8Q[1]R[1]R[1]S[1]S[1]T[1]T[1]:T[1]ST[1]lT[1]
T[1]T[1]U[1]U[1]VV[1]aV[1]}V[1]??
V[1]W[1]MX[1]tX[1]X[1]X[1]

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gdMP[1]P[1]R[1]R[1]R[1]R[1]R[1] R[1]

S[1]S[1]S[1]S[1] S[1]S[1] S[1]T[1]T[1]
T[1]
T[1]T[1]8T[1]:T[1];T[1]QT[1]ST[1]TT[1]jT[1]lT[1]mT[1]T[1]
T[1]T[1] T[1]T[1]U[1]U[1]??
U[1]U[1]U[1]U[1]TV[1]VV[1]`V[1]bV[1]{V[1]}
V[1]~V[1]V[1]V[1]V[1]W[1]W[1]W[1]KX[1]MX[1]NX[1]rX[1]tX[1]uX[1]

X[1]Z[1]
[[1]?\[1]@\[1]W\[1]Z\[1]

h>CJaJmH

sH

hXl'6CJ]aJmH

sH

hXl'CJaJmH

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hXl'hXl'CJaJmH

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"hXl'hXl'6??CJ]aJmH

sH

HX[1]X[1]Y[1]-Y[1]Z[1]?Z[1]\[1]][1]^[1]-a[1]/
a[1]0a[1]6a[1]7a[1]8a[1]c[1]e[1]f[1]f[1]1h[1]^i[1]~i[1]i[1]i[1]
i[1]k[1]k[1]

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h[1]\i[1]_i[1]|i[1]i[1]i[1]i[1]i[1]i[1]i[1]i[1] i[1]i[1]
i[1]m[1]m[1]m[1]m[1]
n[1]
n[1]n[1]n[1]4o[1]5o[1]p[1] p[1]p[1] p[1]p[1]
p[1]q[1]q[1]q[1]q[1]q[1] q[1] h>CJaJmH

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hXl'CJaJmH

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%h> hXl'56CJ0]??aJ0mH

sH

h> 6CJ]aJmH

sH

"hXl'hXl'6??CJ]aJmH

sH

hXl'hXl'CJaJmH

sH

:k[1]m[1]m[1]n[1]p[1]q[1] q[1]r[1]s[1]t[1]t[1]
t[1]\$u[1]v[1]v[1]w[1] {[1]| [1]}[1]p~[1]~[1][1][1]Q[1][1]
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s[1]~t[1]t[1]t[1]t[1]t[1]t[1]t[1] t[1]t[1] t[1]u[1]u[1]w[1]y[1]|
[1]| [1]| [1]}[1]p~[1]??~[1]~[1] ~[1]
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[1]
[1]P[1]R[1]k[1]m[1][1][1]?[1]?[1][1] [1]
[1][1]"[1]\$[1]l[1]n[1][1][1][1] [1][1]
"hXl'hXl'6CJ)aJmH

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hXl'CJaJmH

sH

hXl'hXl'CJaJmH

sH

S [1][1]n[1][1]??[1]'[1].[1]m[1][1]'[1]e[1]?[1][1]
[1]![1][1][1]a[1]g[1],[1]M[1]r[1][1]U[1][1] [1] [1]U[1]t[1]

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T`Ta\$

gdM[1][1]%[1]([1],[1]/[1]k[1]n[1][1][1][1][1]%[1]'[1]?
[1]A[1]c[1]f[1][1][1]?[1]?[1][1] [1][1][1][1]
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[1][1]"[1]1?[1]3[1][1][1][1][1][1][1]...[1]N[1]e[1]h[1]|[1]~[1][1]
[1]
[1]
[1]C[1]E[1]#[1]-[1]*[1]-[1]K[1]N[1]p[1]r[1][1][1]?[1]?[1][1]
[1]&[1]([1]=[1]?[1]S[1]V[1][1] [1][1]
[1][1]f[1]h[1][1] hXl'6CJ]aJmH

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"hXl'hXl'6CJ]aJmH

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hXl'hXl'CJaJmH

sH

hXl'CJaJmH

sH

M[1] [1]-[1]![1]2[1]4[1]T[1]V[1]r[1]u[1]K[1]L[1]?[1]?[1][1]
[1]
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[1].[1]x[1]{[1][1][1][1][1]?[1]?[1][1]K[1][1][1][1][1][1]?[1]?
[1]m[1]o[1][1][1][1][1][1][1][1]4[1]6[1]G[1]J[1]R[1]T[1]?[1]?[1]
[1][1]7[1]9[1][1][1][1][1]1[1]
"hXl'hXl'6CJ]aJmH

sH

h > CJaJmH

sH

hXl'hXl'CJaJmH

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hXl'CJaJmH

sH

Nt[1] [1][1]??[1]-[1]A[1]s[1]D[1][1]P?[1]Q[1]![1]z[1]?[1][1]
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T`Ta\$

gdM"[1]"[1]5[1]n[1][1][1]I[1]T[1][1][1]3[1]c[1][1]2[1] [1][1]
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gdM1[1]4[1]A[1]F[1]a[1]d[1]{[1]}[1][1][1][1][1]
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[1][1][1][1][1][1][1][1][1] < [1] > [1]u[1]w[1][1] [1][1][1][1][1]
[1][1][1][1][1] [1][1] [1][1][1][1] [1][1]![1]-[1]/[1][1][1][1][1]?
[1]?[1]?[1]?[1][1] [1][1] [1]?[1]A[1][1][1][1][1][1][1]
[1] "hXl'hXl'6CJ]aJmH

sH

h>CJaJmH

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hXl'hXl'CJaJmH

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hXl'CJaJmH

sH

N[1]??[1]?[1]?[1]?[1]?[1]?[1]?[1][1] [1][1]

[1],[1]/[1]I[1]L??[1]V[1]Y[1]r[1]u[1]}[1][1][1][1][1][1][1]
[1]?[1]?[1]?[1]?[1][1] [1][1] [1][1][1]R[1]T[1][1]?[1]?[1][1]
[1][1]
?[1][1]#[1]&[1],[1]/[1]R[1]U[1]_[1]b[1]h[1]k[1]s[1]v[1]~[1][1]
[1][1]4[1]6[1]>[1]@[1],[1]0[1]N[1]P [1] [1] [1][1]c[1] [1] [1]
[1] "hXl'hXl'6CJ]?aJmH

sH

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N[1] [1]??[1]?[1][1].[1]K[1]X?[1]t[1][1][1][1][1][1] [1][1]??
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"hXl'hXl'6CJ]aJmH

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hXl'hXl'CJaJmH

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sH

NE [1]F[1]??[1]?[1]?[1]?[1]?[1]?[1]?[1]?[1] [1] [1] [1] [1]

[1][1]
[1][1] [1][1]% [1]'[1]Q [1]S[1]f [1]h[1]?[1]?[1]?[1]?[1]- [1]/[1].
[1]0[1]c [1]e[1]y [1]{[1]?[1]?[1]?[1]?[1] [1] [1] [1] [1][1] [1]

[1]a [1]c[1]?[1]?[1]?[1]?[1] [1] [1] [1]#[1] = [1]C[1]?[1]?
[1]?[1]?[1]?[1]?[1]n [1] [1]-[1]/ [1]d[1]f [1][1]?[1] [1] [1] [1]
[1] [1] "hXl'hXl'6CJ]?
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hXl'hXl'CJaJmH

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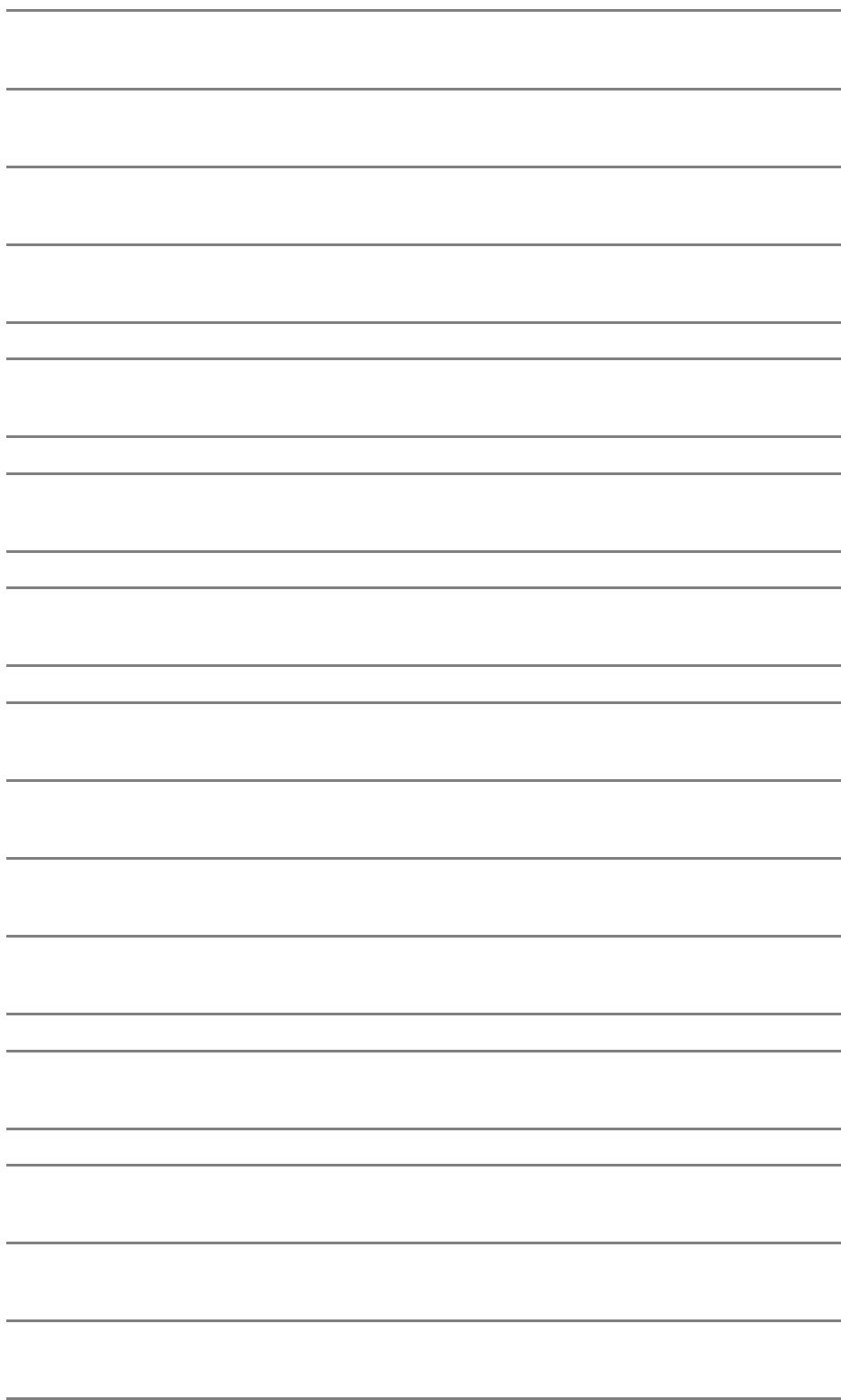
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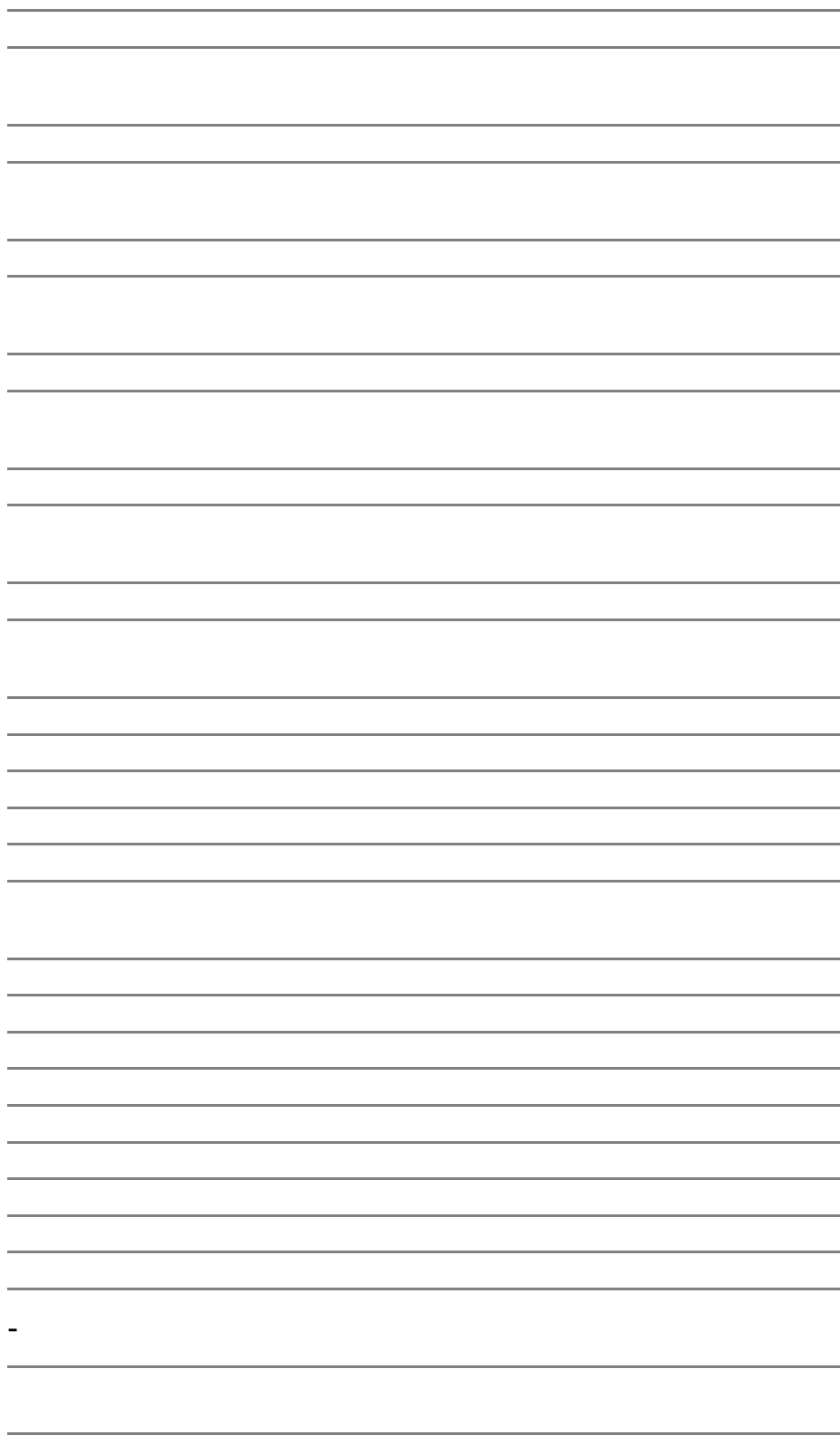
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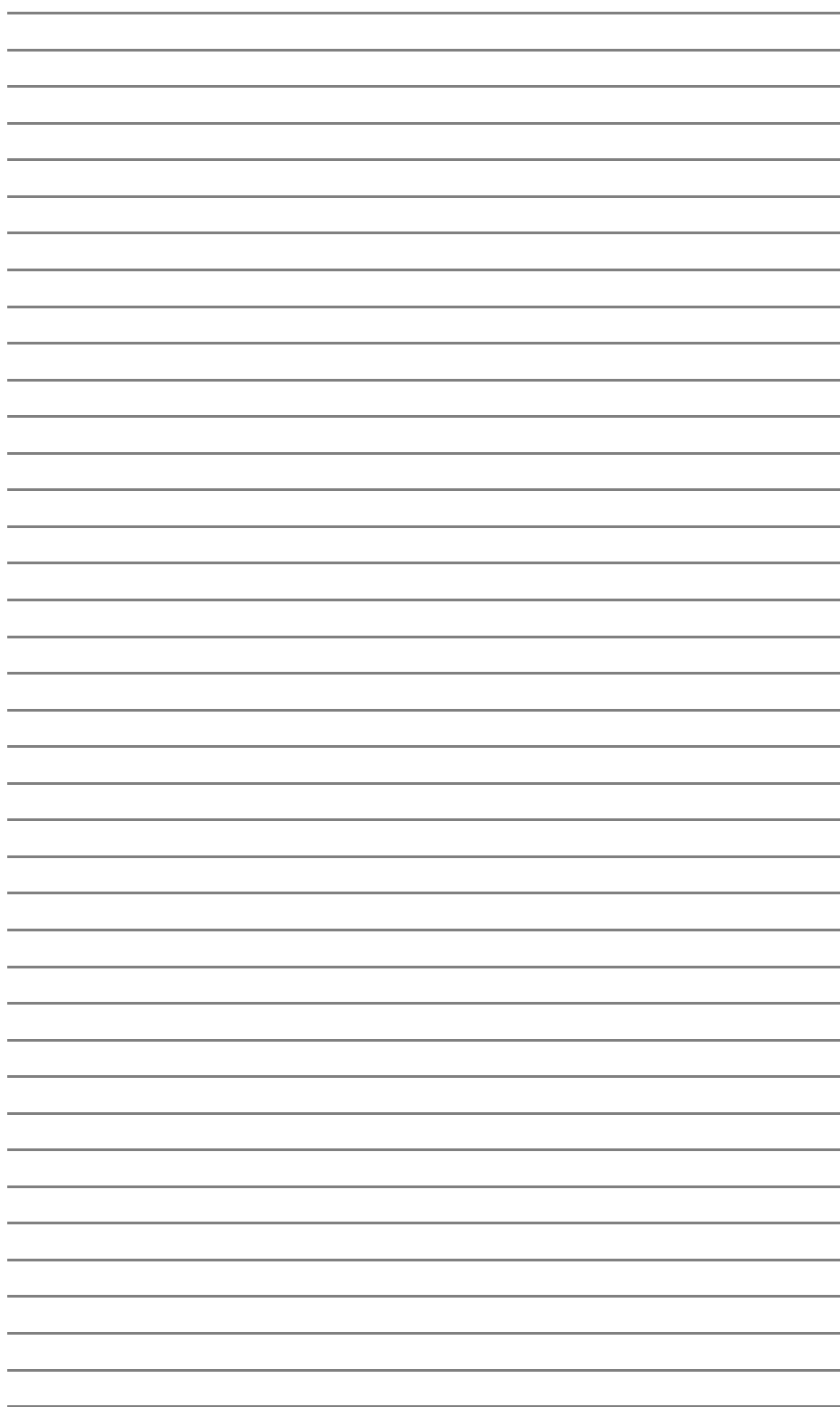
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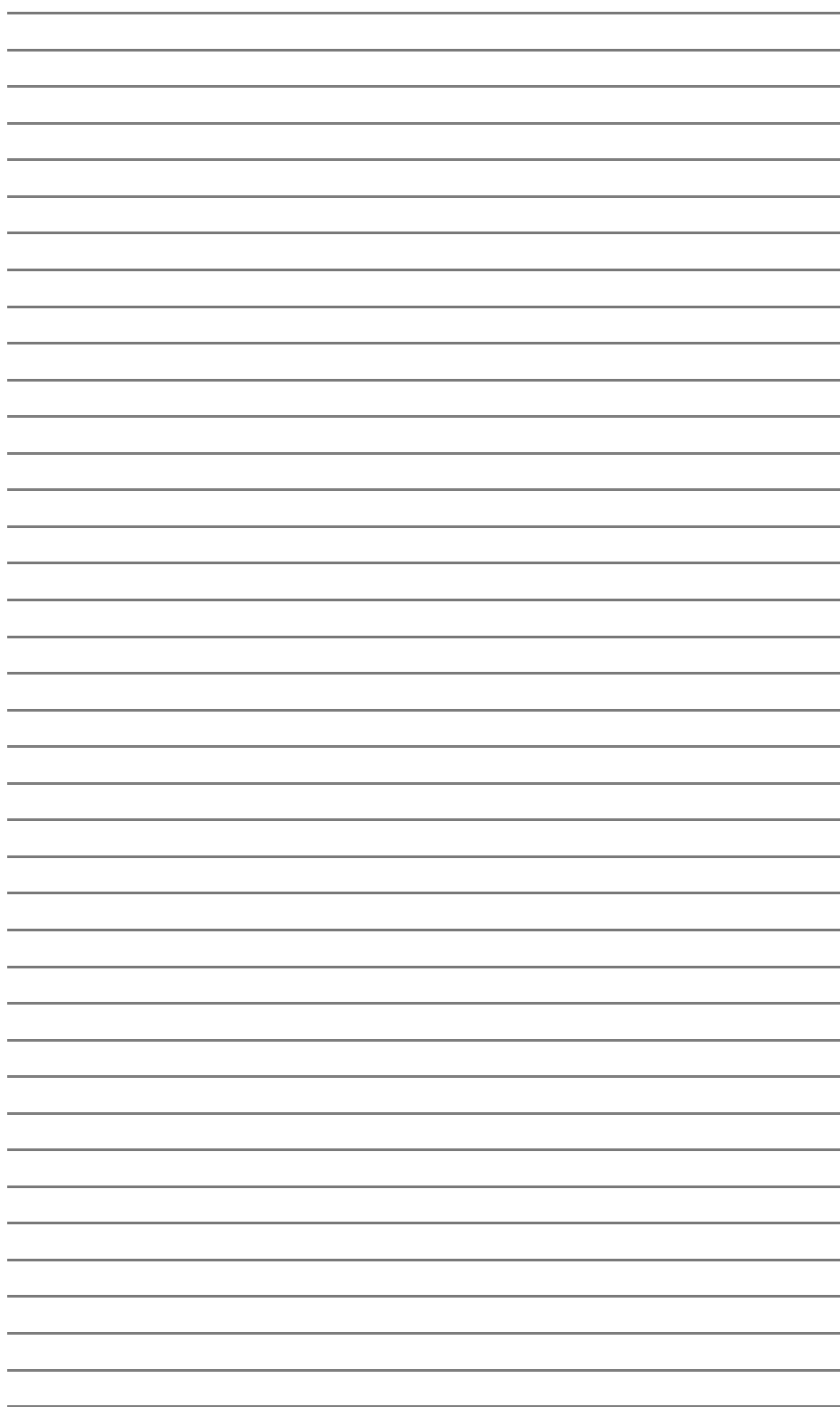
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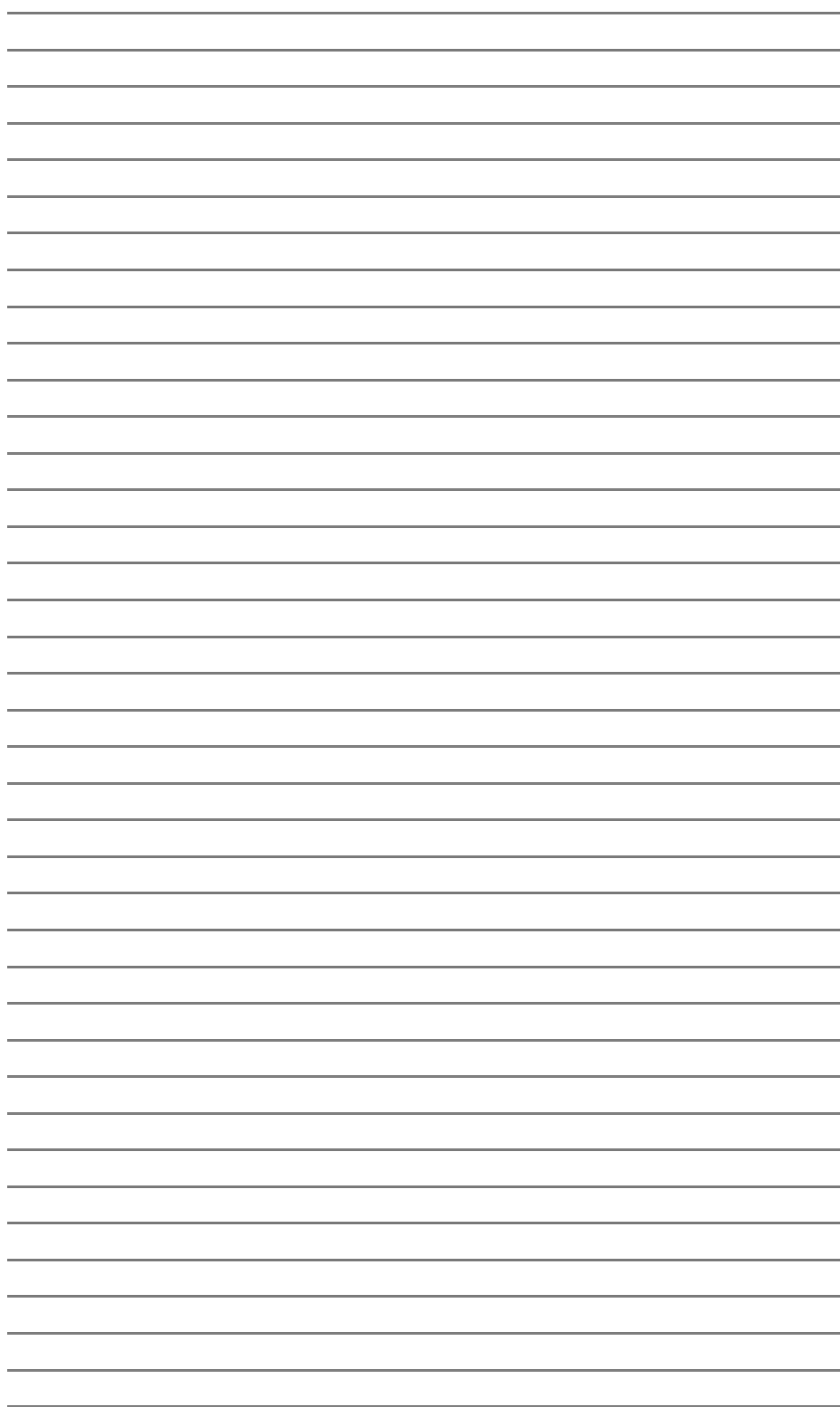
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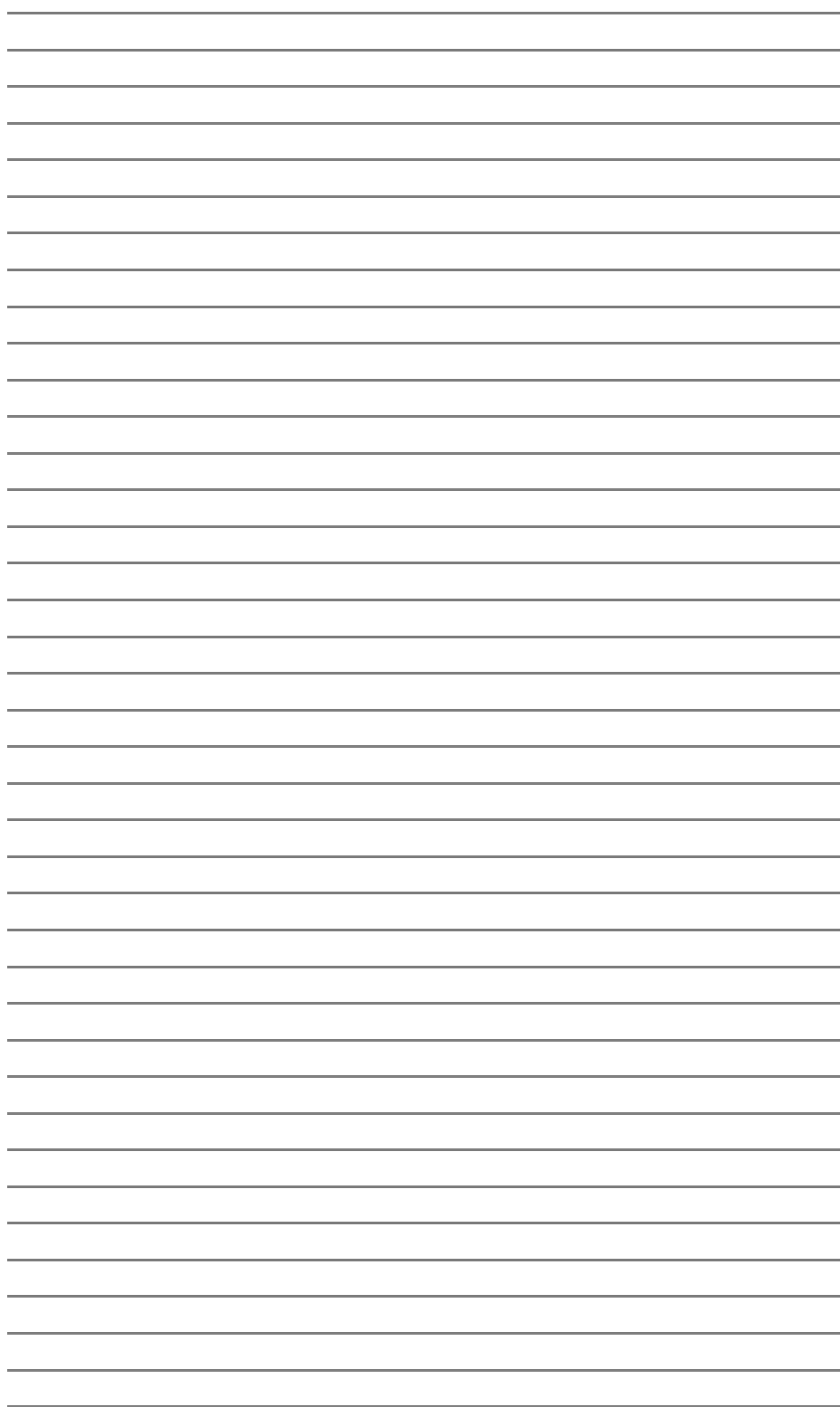
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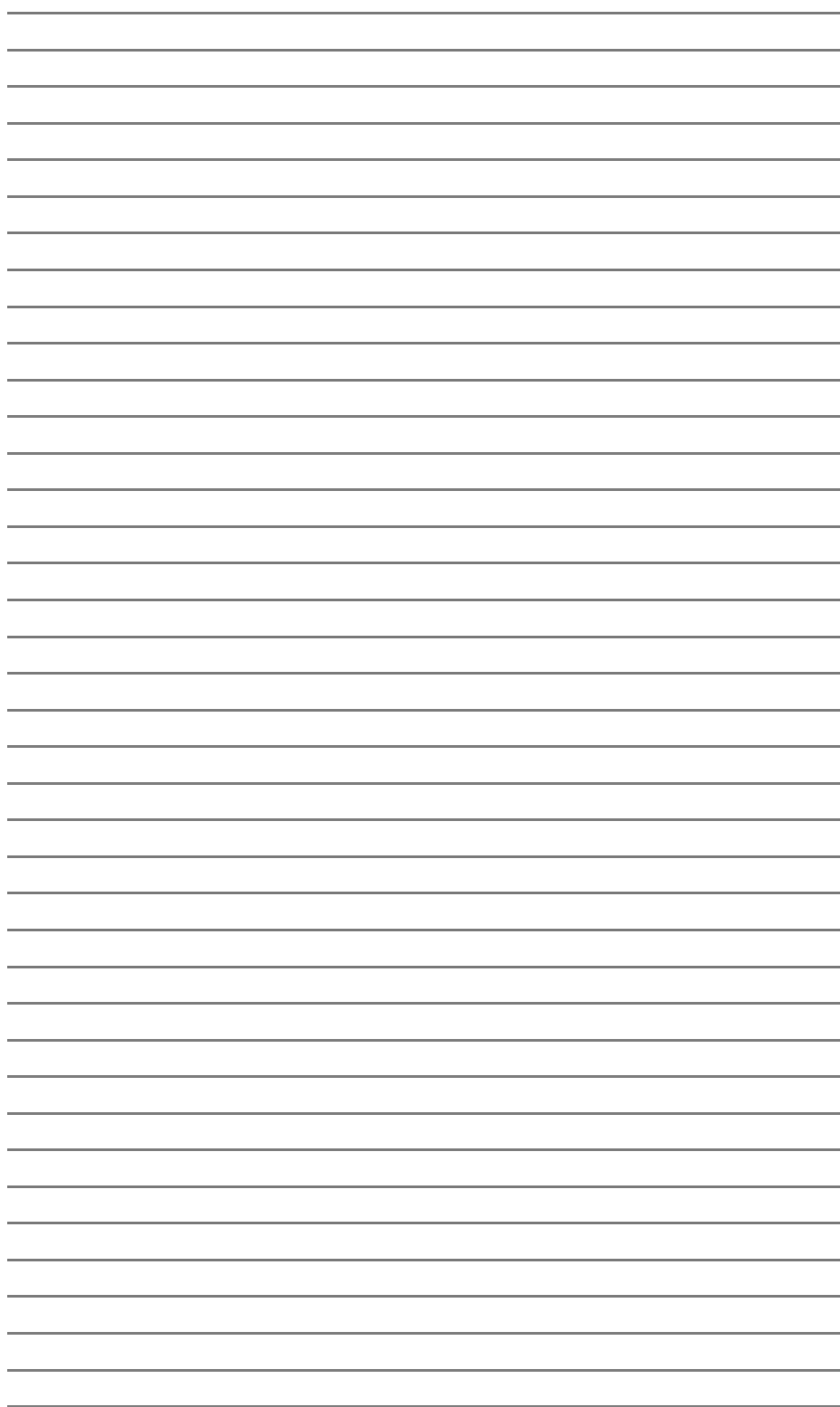
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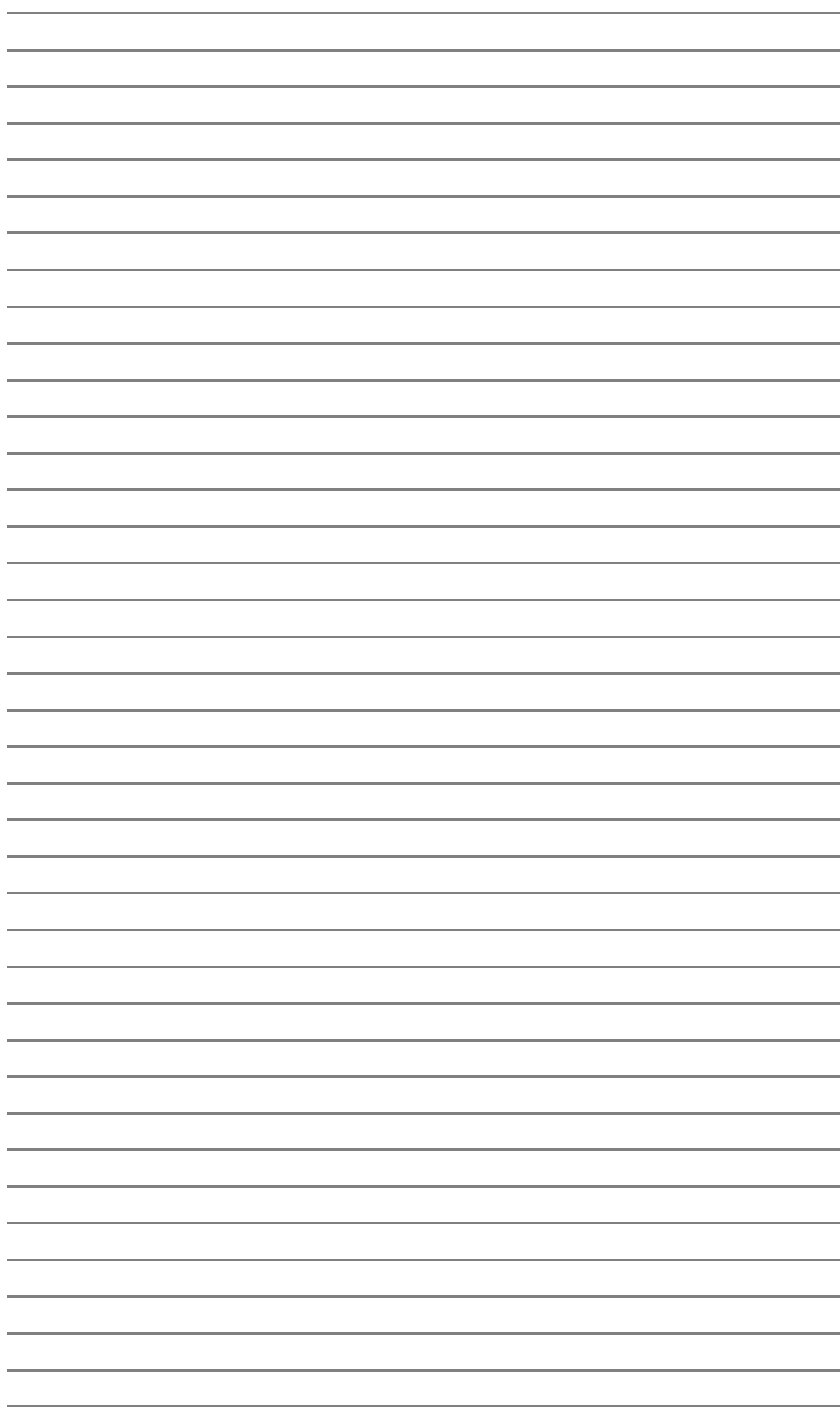


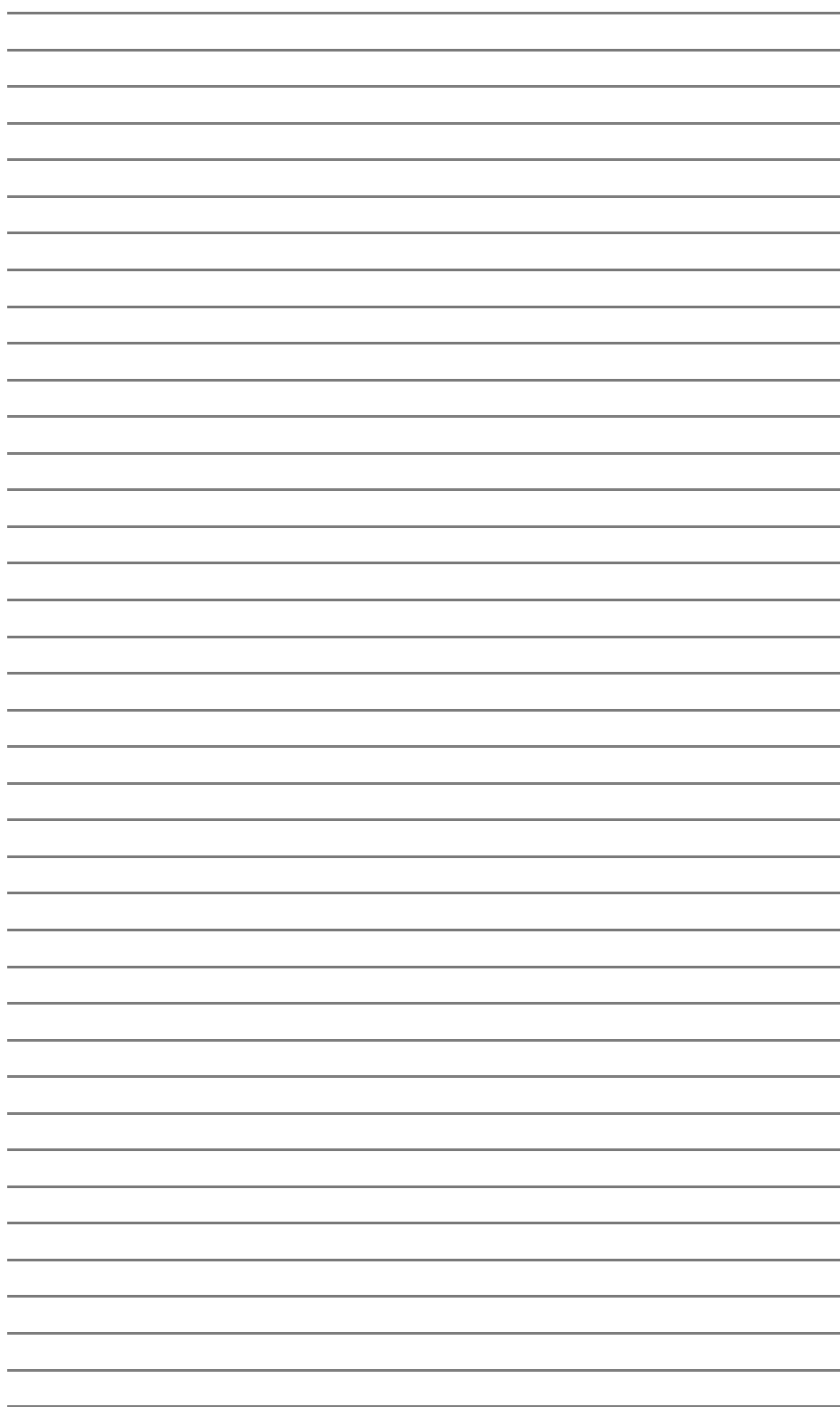


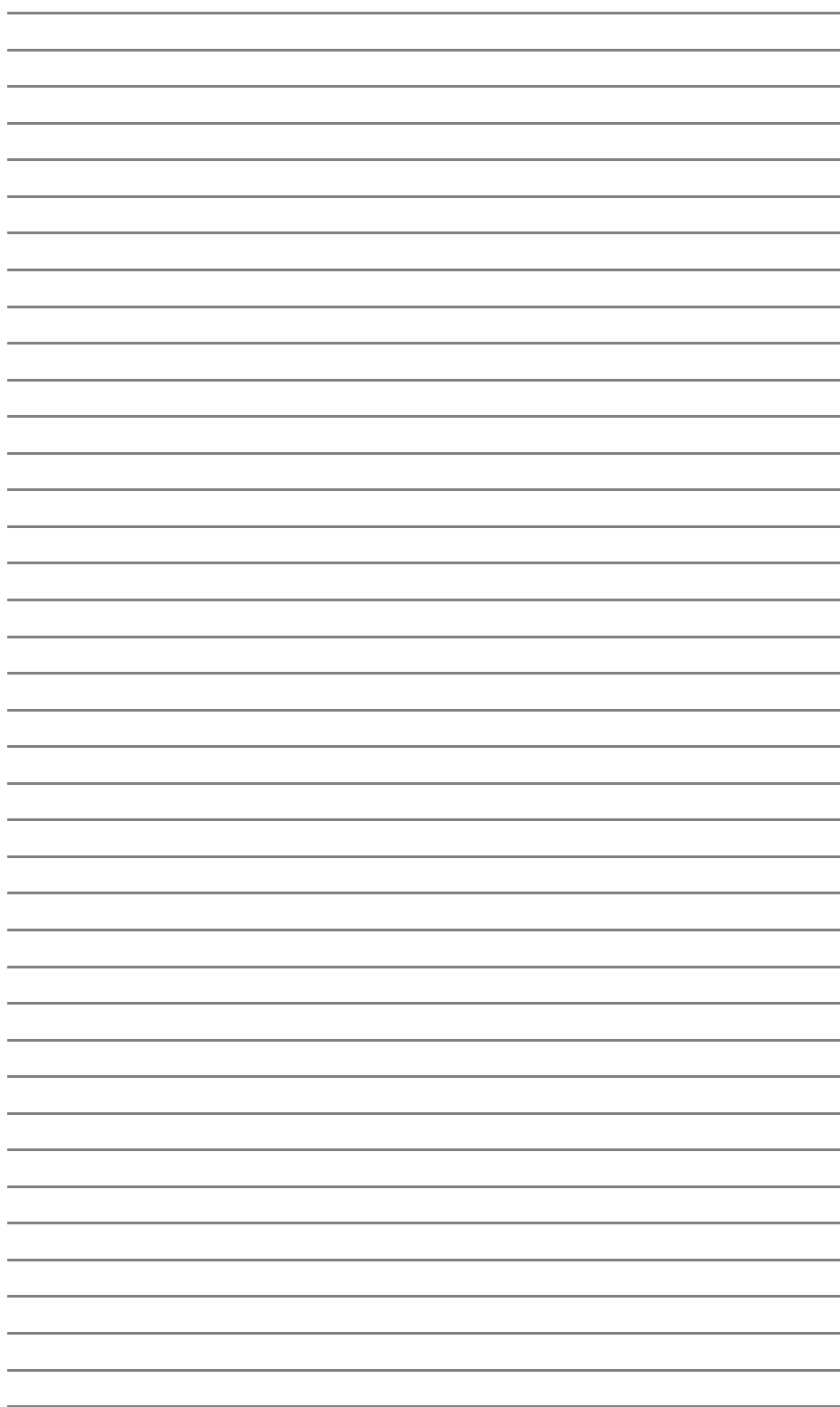












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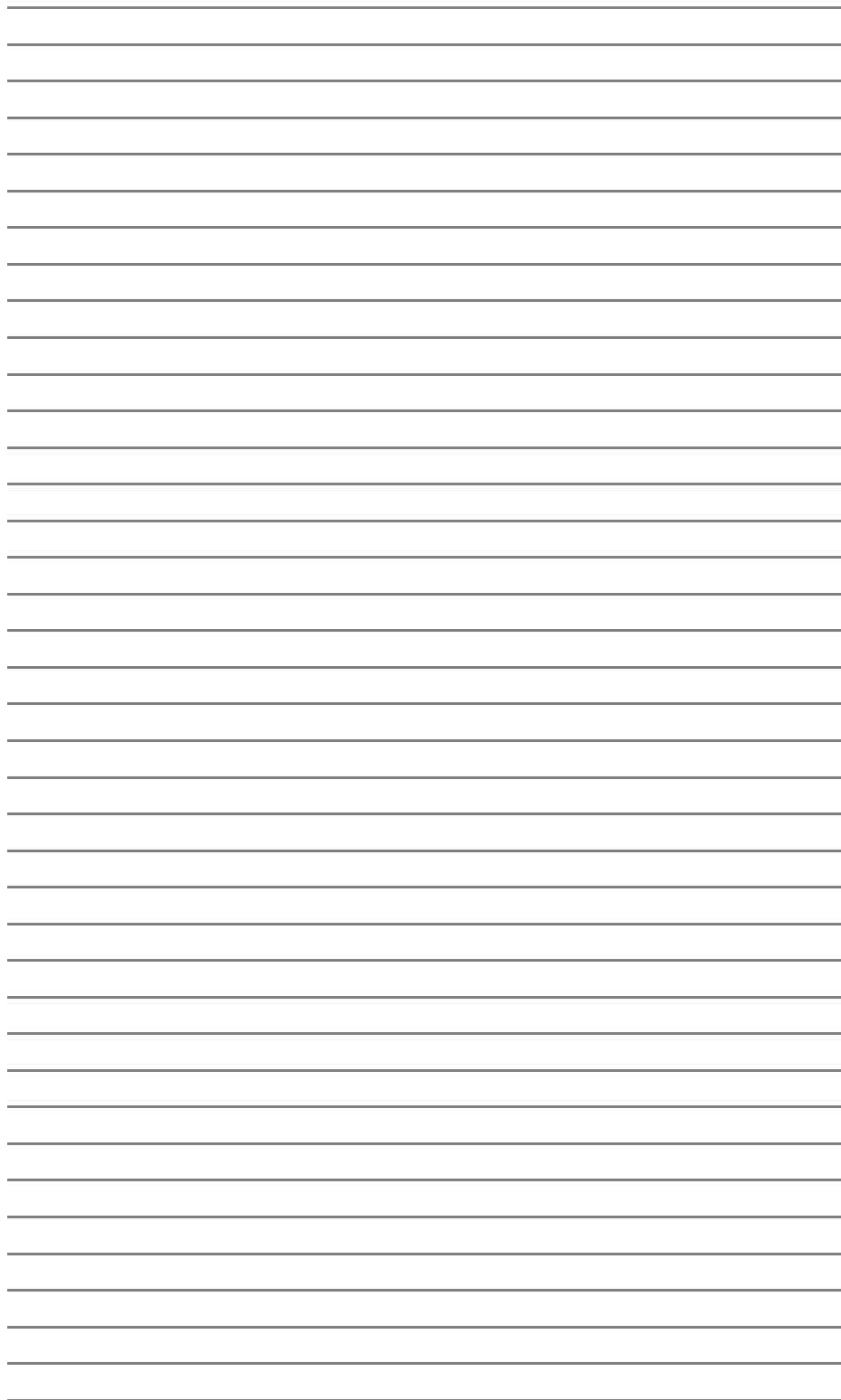
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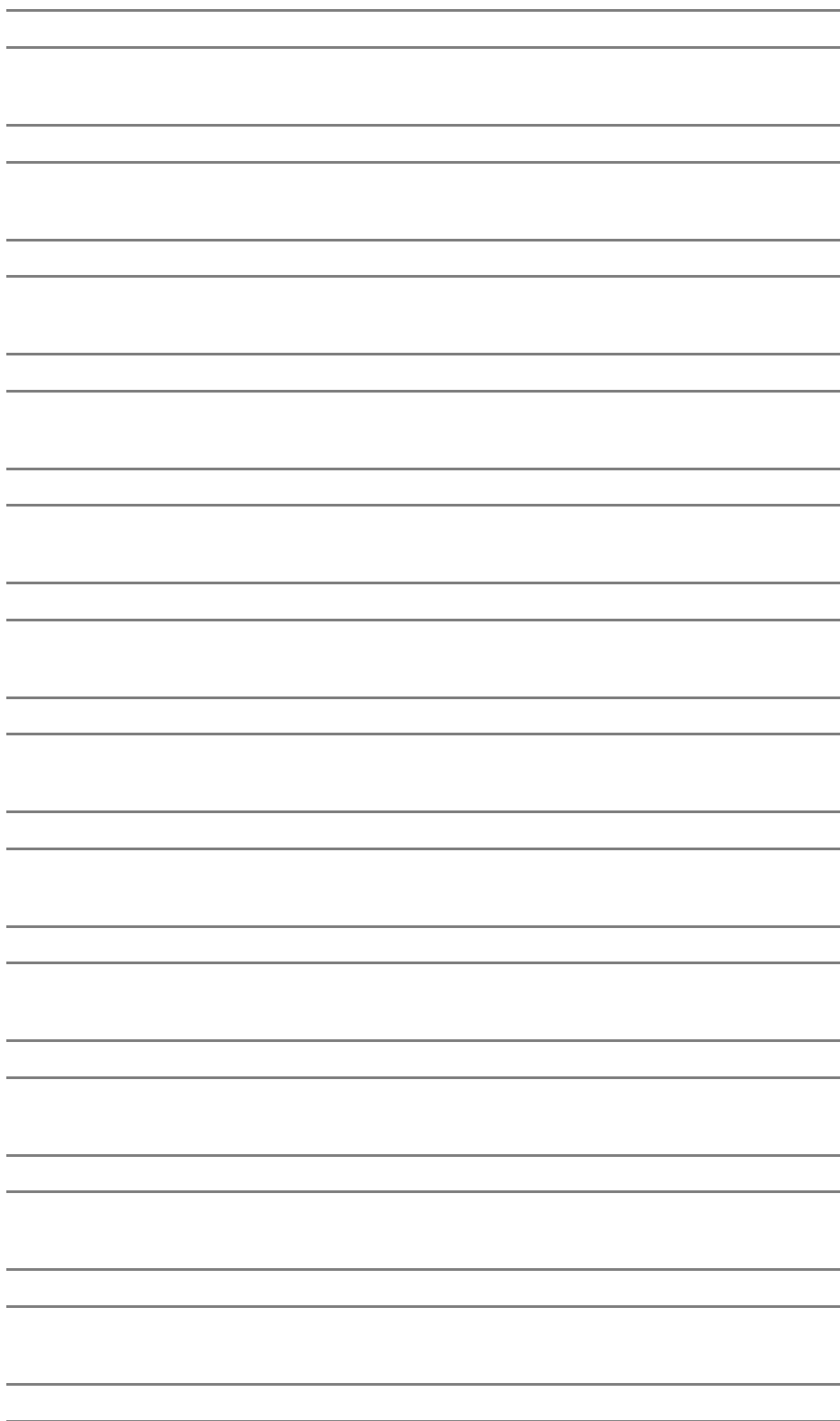
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